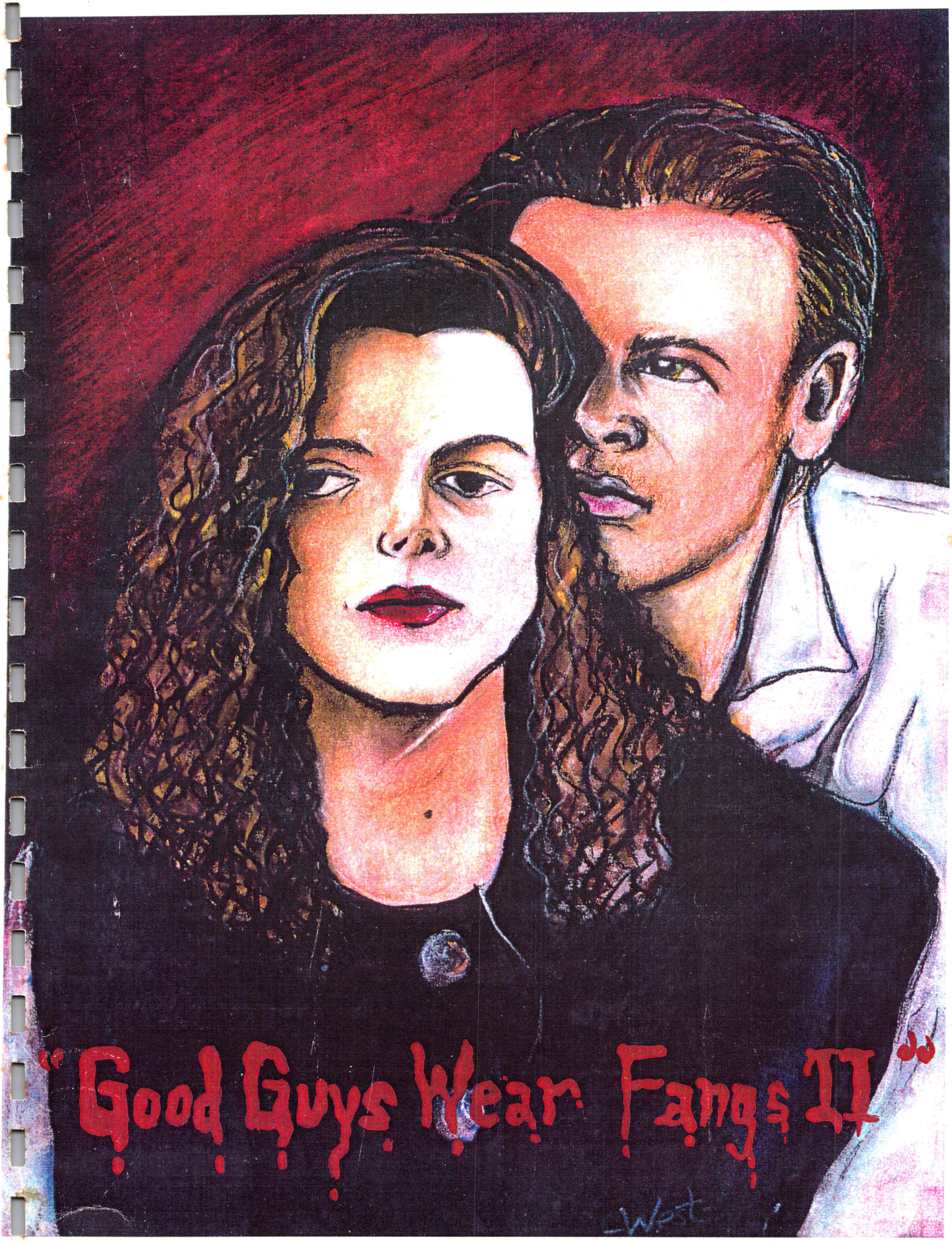
"Good Guys Wear Fangs II"

Good Guys Wear Fangs II

****

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****

May 1993

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* * *

FRONT COVER: *Dreaming Humanity*, by Michele West captures Nick Knight and Natalie Lambert of *Forever Knight* in a thoughtful moment.

BACK COVER: *Nicholas and Varina*, by Barb Johnson (original characters created by Diana Smith and Pat Dunn).

INTERIOR ART:

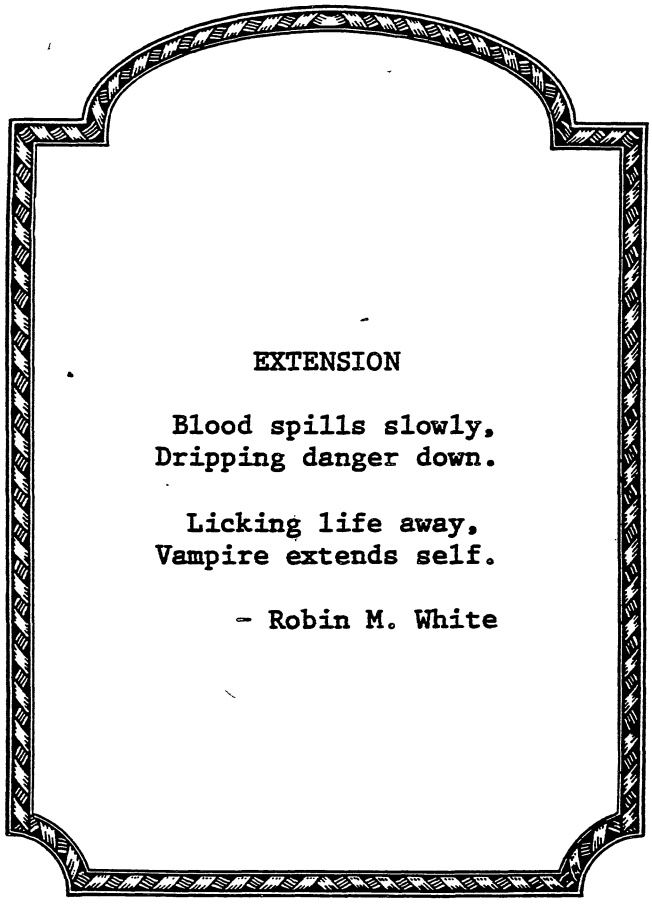
Michele West: Facing p. 1; pp. 4, 8, 33, 202, 210, 217, 292, 301, 338, 376, 377.
J.J. Jones: p. 95.
Peggy Spalding: pp. 113, 115, 147 *(page 147 reprinted from GGWF1)*.
Barb Johnson: pp. 150, 314, 333.
Athan Y. Chilton: pp. 160, 194.
T.J. Glenn: pp. 196, 200, 283.
Cheryl Duval: pp. 222, 230, 235, 245, 251, 265.
Sherlock: p. 266.
Todd Parrish: p. 335.
Frances Quinn: 355, 356, 361, 363, 367.
Clip Art: pp. 158, 277, 374, all borders.

* * *

TYPING: Paula Sanders, Vickie Harpe, Mary Ann McKinnon, and all the wonderful contributors who were kind enough to submit their stories on disk.

PROOFREADING: Barb Fish. Thank you ever so much! And thanks to everyone who proofread their own stories once they were in final form! (But, as always, the editor takes final responsibility for any errors.)

UNIVERSE DESCRIPTIONS: These are by the respective authors, with some help from the editor, except that Laurie Keeper's astute description of *Stingray* has been here reprinted from GGWF1.



EXTENSION

Blood spills slowly,
Dripping danger down.

Licking life away,
Vampire extends self.

- Robin M. White

Editorial

May 25, 1993

Dear Friends and Fans of "Good Guy" Vampires,

I can't believe that I'm actually writing the editorial to the second issue of **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS.** It seems just weeks ago that the **first** issue went to press! At any rate, I sincerely hope that there is something here for everyone.

Valerie Meachum, editor of **HEARTSBLOOD,** has given us an absolutely wonderful Nick and Natalie tale based upon **FOREVER KNIGHT.** In this one, Nick's worst enemy seeks a diabolically twisted revenge against Nick and those he loves. Not to be missed! Art by Michele West.

B.N. Fish has continued her **STARSKY & HUTCH/NICK KNIGHT** crossover saga. In "Lessons," Hutch must cope with his first full night in the Life.

For **MIAMI VICE** fans, we have a gritty tale of Sonny Crockett and an undercover assignment to investigate a mysterious *femme fatale* with a deadly secret... Story by Karen Howard. Art by J.J. Jones.

In "Promises," **STINGRAY** must himself pay back a favor and try to cope with his deadly fear of vampires when his old friend Sabri calls him up -- to help locate the stolen ashes of her vampire lover's former paramour. Story by Heidi Staneslow. Art by Peggy Spalding.

In the first issue of **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS,** we met Margaret Carter's original character Nigel and his friend Denise when he conned her into helping him steal a mysterious and ancient tome from the University Library's rare book room. Now we meet them again in "First Date," in which she brings him home to meet her all-American family. Also set in her **VANISHING BREED** universe is "Wild Branch," in which Roger and his human mate Britt meet up with a very different brand of vampires when the biker gang from **BLOOD TIES** mugs them in a stairwell and kidnaps Britt. (Art by Barb Johnson and T.J. Glenn)

CATCHING CAT, by Athan Y. Chilton, is back, this time as the first installment in a full-fledged novel. This is one of the most haunting and lyrically beautiful stories I have ever read, and I cannot recommend it highly enough. She spins a tale that will pull you right off the page into a magical never-never land. And she knows what she's writing about -- Magical Merlin's Band is loosely modeled on the various professional bands Ms. Chilton played and sang with for twenty years beginning in the sixties, and the songs we see quoted are real songs performed on real stages... (I didn't find this out until I asked her how she got the songs and the descriptions of the band and the music to seem so real!) At any rate, if anyone is actually interested in hearing these lyrics played and sung, SASE to me or to Ms. Chilton at the address given at the end of her story. I think she just *might* -- if there's enough response -- consent to do a tape for us! (And check out the art. She does great illustrations, too.)

In the first issue of **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS** we met April -- and saw her do a poignant good deed and reach back for a brief glimpse at her lost humanity. This time, we learn how she first reached out to the dark... A **VAMPIRES OF MARSH HOLLOW** story by Jack Summers. Art by T.J. Glenn.

All of us met **NICHOLAS & VARINA** (created by Diana Smith and Pat Dunn) in **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 1.** (She looks like **Marina Sirtis** of **ST: TNG** and he looks like **Duncan Regehr** of **ZORRO.**) Now they're back! In "Heart of a Knight," set around 1349, they meet up with Nick of **FOREVER KNIGHT** back in the days when he was hopelessly under the thumb of LaCroix -- but leave him with the first glimmer of hope that there might possibly be some way to be free. In "Interlude: Part I," **MACGYVER** renews his acquaintance with **Varina** (whom he met in "Truth About Murdoc," an action-adventure tale which appeared in **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 1**), while in "Interlude: Part II," **Nicholas** has a romantic adventure of his own... (Art by Michele West and Barb Johnson)("Interlude: Part II" by Anne Motley)(And before I forget, congratualations to **Pat and Di** are in order! Take a look later in this editorial for the stories voted "readers' favorites" in the first issue of **GGWF**!)

"Bloodmates," by Ann Leonhart. If you like **ST: TNG,** Riker and Troi, happily ever after, and romance novels, this one's for you... (Art by Cheryl Duval)

"Yuck! Green Blood" mixes humor and romance, the new **DARK SHADOWS**, and **STAR TREK** to come up with one delicious blend of happily-ever-after for Barnabas and Josette and that long-awaited come-upperance for Angelique! Story by Susan L. Rock. Art by Cheryl Duval.

For pure tongue-in cheek, check out "David's Journal," by Lorraine Anderson. Art by Sherlock.

For an abrupt change of pace, "Healer," by Cheryl Connors is very definitely one of my personal favorites; it is one of the most poignant **NICK KNIGHT** tales I have ever read. Art by Michele West.

For fans of both **PHOENIX** and **NICK KNIGHT**, we have "Kindred Souls," by Dianne Smith, editor of **SHERWOOD TUNNELS**. A dark night, a strange hitchhiker, an even stranger encounter with primordial evil... Don't miss this one!

Finally, we have "Arrows of Darkness," by Janet P. Reedman, well-known **ROBIN OF SHERWOOD** fan writer and award-winning poet. What if **ROBIN OF SHERWOOD** had been made into a vampire, and thus "survived" the tor? What would the ensuing centuries have held for him? For all fans of characters created by **Michael Praed**, and anyone who loves beautifully lyrical writing, I highly recommend that you check this one out! (Art by Frances Quinn. Don't miss the illo on page 363!)

Now that I've given you an overview of what's in store this time, I'd like to point out that the idea here is that everyone should be able to enjoy every story, not just those in the fandoms they are familiar with. To that end, every story has either an introduction to the fandom with it, or has sufficient internal explanation so that no one should get confused; the idea is to treat every story as if the reader knows nothing at all ahead of time about the universe it's set in. The only exceptions to this are **NICK KNIGHT**, **FOREVER KNIGHT**, **STAR TREK**, **ST: TNG**, and the new **DARK SHADOWS**; rightly or wrongly it is assumed that most readers will have at least a basic familiarity with these universes, although perhaps a basic note on the difference between **NICK KNIGHT** and **FOREVER KNIGHT** might be in order.

NICK KNIGHT was a 1989 made-for-TV movie starring **Rick Springfield**. His basic goal in life, helped by his friend Jack Brittingdon, coroner, was to find a way to somehow become human again. In this failed pilot, he killed his mentor LaCroix--but not before LaCroix had killed archaeologist Alyce Hunter, a budding "romantic interest" for Nick who had been helping him solve a series of "vampire-style" murders that were plagueing his home city of San Francisco.

FOREVER KNIGHT stars **Geraint Wyn Davies** and has so far run for approximately 22 episodes during 1992 and 1993. It has been cancelled by CBS late-night "Crime Time After Prime Time," but the producers are seeking other means to keep it alive (see below). It began with a remake of the pilot movie noted above, with an entirely new cast except for Nick's partner Schanke; it is quite notable that his friend the coroner is now Dr. Natalie Lambert (Catherine Disher), and fans have been following with quite a bit of interest the "don't want to admit it" bare beginnings of a romantic relationship developing between them over the course of the season. Other changes from the original pilot also affect the interactions between the characters: The vampiric "ice queen" Janette of the original is now played by Deborah Duchene as Nick's eccentric but loyal friend, confidante, and one-time lover; Schanke is more subtle and less obnoxious; and this LaCroix (Nigel Bennett) was seeking more to destroy Nick, while the earlier incarnation of the character was more interested in reclaiming him. And finally, this Nick was "brought across" in 1228, while accompanying publicity for the original movie listed Nick's age at about four hundred years; the setting has been moved to Toronto; and he's now not altogether unsuccessful in taking at least small steps toward the cure for his vampiric nature that he still so desperately seeks.

Wow! Guess I got carried away. You got a detailed description of **NICK KNIGHT** and **FOREVER KNIGHT** after all!

As noted above, **FOREVER KNIGHT** has been canceled by CBS-TV; the possible deal with USA cable network has also fallen through. The producers are not giving up, however, and are still actively seeking a way to bring it to us in syndication. Write to them at Paragon Entertainment Corporation, 119 Spadina Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5V2L1 to show your support.

Last time, I asked everyone to list their five favorite stories and three favorite authors. Although only about twenty people voted (out of over 300 zines sold!!!), I decided it was still only fair to share the results with everyone. Please remember that since so few readers responded that this may not accurately represent the feelings of the readership as a whole.

FAVORITE STORIES FROM GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 1:

#1 - "Partners in Time," *(received twice as many votes as any other story!)*
by P.N. Elrod

#2 - "The Truth About Murdoc,"
by Diana Smith and Pat Dunn

#3 - "Angel of Darkness, Angel of Light,"
by Diana Smith, Pat Dunn, and Valerie Meachum

#4 - Tie:

"Of Wooden Stakes and Silver Crosses,"
by Diana Smith and Pat Dunn

"Running,"
by Cheryl Connors

"In the Beginning,"
by Lisa Savignano

"Exodus,"
by Janet P. Reedman

FAVORITE ARTISTS:

#1 Barb Johnson, #2 Athan Y. Chilton, #3 Frances Quinn, #4 Derrin, #5 Peggy Spalding.

(If anyone would like a technical explanation as to how I calculated the above, just drop me a line and I'll be happy to explain!)

In answer to the question of whether readers preferred that **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS** continue to run both original and media stories, or whether it should be broken up into two separate editions, and which edition(s) they would purchase if it were split, about a quarter of those responding preferred that it be separated, but they would not purchase the original stories edition; in other words, they would simply eliminate said original stories! But, on the other hand, even though three-quarters of those responding preferred that the zine remain a mixture, half of the total would still buy both editions if it were broken up. Confusing, or what? At any rate, the bottom line is that GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS will remain as is, a mixture of both media and original stories.

And finally, the average rating for those who rated GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS on a scale of 1 to 10 was 8.4.

Now, on to this year's survey. For a little friendly arm-twisting, I am offering a **FREE** copy of the nextt issue **GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS** to the lucky winner of a drawing to be held this time next year. To enter, just complete and return your survey! It's easy to find -- just check out the last page of the zine. And don't forget those friendly **LETTERS OF COMMENT**! Let me know what you liked, what you didn't like, what can be improved, or just write and say hello! And remember to send everything that doesn't have to do with ordering the zine to the editorial address (that's me!) rather than to the "order from" address.

Until next time,

Mary Ann

Mary Ann B. McKinnon
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

M. WEST

FURTHER TO FALL

by

Valerie Meachum

The balance isn't any harder
You've just got further to fall...
--David Wilcox

Beep.

"Hey, Knight, it's Schanke. Four-thirty P.M. Sorry to bug you on your day off, but nobody's seen or heard from Natalie since she left last night, and the folks in the coroner's office are getting a little antsy. I know you guys are pretty tight, and I thought you'd want to stop by her place, see what you can find out."

*

Nick could smell the blood from the stairs, and for a moment he held on to the hope that it was in some other apartment, any other apartment.

Rapping loudly on the door, he called, "Hey, Nat, open up! You got a lot of people worried."

No response, not even the sound of human breathing--though Sidney's feline presence was evident--and the blood-scent was undeniably within. Checking quickly to make sure he was not observed, he gave the door a hearty shove, forcing the stout deadbolt through the doorframe.

"Nat!" He reached the sprawled figure in a heartbeat, and in another knew he was too late. She was utterly still, not a breath, not a heartbeat, though he strained his vampire hearing for a hint of either. The grey tabby sat guarding his mistress, looking up at the detective as if beseeching him to help her.

Grief and black rage welled up in him, joined by a sharp stab of guilt when he saw the two neat holes in her throat. How had he thought he could shield her from his world? He should have learned by now--no matter what his intentions, mortals he got close to always paid the price.

"I'll find out who did this, Nat," he swore, his voice low and dangerous. "I'll find them, and they'll wish the sun had found them first!" He heard the floor beneath her carpet crack under his fist. "And no matter what I do, you'll still be gone," he added in a whisper.

After several minutes he managed to collect himself enough to cross the room to the telephone. Suddenly he froze, hand poised above the buttons, at the sound of a soft moan, followed by a confused *meow* from Sidney. Receiver still in hand, he watched in shock as Nat drew her knees up in a fetal position with a whimper like a hurt puppy.

"Oh, no," he said softly. *"Oh, Nat, please no."* A moment ago he had cried his grief for her death--and he had been certain she was dead--but this was infinitely worse. A tiny sliver of his mind pointed out that it was not too late

to break her neck and spare her what must otherwise follow; it took no thought at all to know that he would never be able to do so.

She whimpered again, snapping him back into focus. Shoving aside his horror, he quickly dialed the coroner's office. "Hi, Grace, it's Nick Knight." He was surprised at the steadiness of his own voice. "Natalie says she called in sick this morning. The message must have been misplaced... Yeah, she's a little out of it, but I think she's starting to feel better. Sure. Thanks."

Settling the phone back in place, he turned his attention back to Nat. If he waited for hunger to drive her wide awake, she would be in agony before they reached his place; but she was close enough already that if he carried her to the car she would probably awaken en route, and he didn't like the thought of trying to calm her and drive at the same time. The only alternative was to try and awaken her before she was really ready.

"Nat?" Kneeling on the floor beside her, Nick propped her up in a sitting position, brushing unruly curls from her face. "Natalie, can you hear me?"

"Wha--?" Her voice was barely there, but she was responding.

"It's me, it's Nick. You have to wake up now." He took one of her hands, and she squeezed back. "That's right, that's good. Now, stay sitting up for me, can you do that?"

"Think so."

"Okay, good. I'll help you; I won't let you fall. Stay with me now." He was losing her, the hand in his loosening its grip. "Come on, Nat, wake up! Open your eyes and look at me."

She did, blinking several times as he came into focus. "Nick? What're you doing here?"

"One thing at a time. We're going to stand up now, and go sit on the couch for a minute. You ready?"

"Sure." She lurched to her feet without too much assistance, then took a reasonably steady few steps to the couch, where she lapsed into dazed silence.

Nick snatched up an afghan from a nearby chair and wrapped it around her shoulders. "Hey, stay with me here! Shock is not good, Nat; didn't they teach you anything in medical school? Keep talking. How do you feel?"

She thought a moment. "Thirsty."

"Well, that's no surprise; we'll take care of that as soon as we can. Can you walk out to the car?"

She nodded, but the huge hazel eyes staring at him were still glazed with shock, and she pulled the afghan tighter around her shoulders. "Hungry, though."

"I know, Nat. Come on, we're going over to my place."

"Sidney?" She looked around in sudden concern for the cat, who was right beside her on the couch. Sidney's affectionate purring registered on her before she saw him, and a perplexed widening of her eyes told Nick that she also heard the rapid feline heartbeat beneath it.

"He'll be okay until we get back, Nat. Come on."

By the time he pulled the Cadillac into his garage, Natalie was nearly doubled over in pain and Nick was finding it increasingly difficult to act now and think about it later. He had his doubts about whether she would thank him for this when she could think straight again--though she was well aware of what would happen if she tried to go without--but he certainly couldn't stand by and let her suffer. They'd just have to take this mess one step at a time, and any way he looked at it the first step was getting her fed.

"It's all right, Nat," he told her inanely, guiding her to the elevator. "Everything will be all right." It wouldn't, of course, and lying to her hurt as much all the rest. He couldn't recall ever lying to her before. But right now he couldn't tell her the truth: nothing would be all right, not ever again.

It didn't take long to reach their destination, though he doubted she even noticed where she was. The world wouldn't be making much sense to her right now; the unaccustomed acuity of her senses would cause overload until she got used to it, and on top of that her body was shrieking demands her mind couldn't interpret.

Once the bottle was in her hands, though, instinct took over and she gulped it down without hesitation. When it was empty, he gently pried it from her hand and set it on the floor next to the chair, out of her sight.

He knelt by the chair, giving her a moment to pull herself together. "Better?"

"Yeah." She looked around in surprise. "How did we get here?"

Well, she was lucid. Time to face facts. "Natalie," he began, "do you remember what happened when you went home last night?"

She frowned. "Of course. I--" The words stopped abruptly, and she clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Who was it? Do you have any idea?"

She shook her head, swallowed hard. "But he was waiting for *me*, Nick. He knew who I was, and he knows you."

He could have guessed that. "I'm sorry. I should never have dragged you into my problems. None of this would have happened if I'd left you alone, stayed in my own world where I belong!"

"Stop it, Nick!" she told him sharply. He looked up at her in surprise; she sat straight and determined, that familiar set expression suddenly in place. "This is not your fault."

"Isn't it? It's never safe for mortals to get close to us, Nat, and I *knew* that!" He snatched up the bottle and headed for the kitchen as an excuse not to face her. "But I had to be stupid and selfish and make you a target. I have no business having friends."

"Hey, wait a minute here!" He heard her stride up behind him. "I'm your friend because I *want* to be. It's not like I didn't know it was dangerous; there've been times when you frightened me half to death. But you can't just keep people from caring about you, and risk is part of that no matter who you are." When he gave no response, she grasped his shoulder and spun him around to face her. "Nick, will you at least look at me?"

Then she stopped short--because the jerk she had given him had slammed him against the refrigerator, rattling the bottles inside.

It was several seconds before she found her voice again. "Nick," she said a little shakily, "please tell me you exaggerated that."

He shook his head. "You have to be very careful; it takes time to adjust." He tried to laugh and failed miserably. "Don't try to dust your breakables for a while."

"Right. Sure." Gingerly she put her hands in her pockets.

"If I were mortal," he told her seriously, "the fridge door would probably be bashed in." At her stricken look, he added, "Except that you wouldn't have done it that hard, because you're used to me being stronger."

"Actually, I never think about it much."

"Maybe not, but you're aware of it, and consequently you use more force with me than you would with, say, Schanke. It's unconscious--but now you have to learn to pay attention to it."

"I think I have to learn a lot of things."

"Yeah." There was silence for a moment, neither of them certain what to say. Finally Nick put an arm around her shoulders and steered her back into the living room, saying, "Obviously, trying to take your mind off this is impractical, so I think you'd better tell me exactly what happened to you."

Nat laughed shortly. "I have a feeling I'm going to see that famous temper of yours blow sky-high."

"It's already blown." Her voice remained calm, but now she recognized the cold fury that had been in his eyes the entire time. "I have never, in almost eight hundred years, been angrier than I am tonight. But that doesn't do you any good. What *will* do you good is to confront what happened, what was said, what you thought. And when you're finished..." He paused, remembering what he had felt when what he had become really sank in. "When you're finished, either you'll be ready to deal with this...or else *I'll* be the one pulling *you* away from the window come morning."

M.
WEST

*

Dammit, I just replaced that bulb, *Natalie thought irritably, flipping the unresponsive switch by her front door. Bone-weary after a marathon shift to rival any cop's, all she wanted right now was a soft bed and a peaceful remainder of the night to enjoy it.*

Skitch. *The little sound of a match nearly stopped her heart, and by its light she glimpsed the stranger who held it, standing in her living room where he did* ***not*** *belong.*

Just for a second, then he blew out the match while she turned to get out of the apartment. By now Nat's eyes had adjusted enough to see that the man was suddenly between the door and her reaching hand. She opened her mouth to call for help, but the sound died in her throat as the intruder caught her gaze and held it.

"No scream, Dr. Lambert," he said softly, matching her step for step as she backed away. "Not even a sound."

Gathering her strength and scrambling to recall the few details she knew about this, she forced herself to look away from the unblinking dark eyes, only to find herself pinned against the living room wall.

"Look at me," the stranger whispered, inches from her ear.

Focusing stubbornly on the toe of her left shoe, Nat shook her head. She couldn't outrun him; she had to outthink him, and if she let him establish eye contact again she wouldn't get a chance to think at all.

Fingers brushed her cheek; she pulled her head sharply away. "Are you afraid, Natalie? I may call you that, mayn't I?"

"I'd be pretty stupid if I weren't," she snapped. "I know what you are. What do you want?"

"What do you think?" he returned, taking hold of her chin and forcing her to face him. Nat squeezed her eyes shut, and he laughed, a surprisingly pleasant sound. "Look at me, Natalie," he whispered again, smoothing back a strand of hair that had escaped from her barrette. "There's no need to fear."

Without meaning to she opened her eyes, and instantly he locked them with his own. "That's better." Natalie flinched slightly when he reached behind her and took the large barrette from her hair, but she could neither look away nor move a step.

Belatedly she remembered Magda's cross, the little gold one the girl had given Nick after he saved her life. Every once in a while Nat tried to get the detective to take it back; for once she was glad he hadn't and reached for the chain inside her blouse.

No sooner did she have hold of it than a hand clamped over hers, jerking the chain away from her neck. His grip slid to her wrist, painfully tight. "Drop it." She held on, and the pressure on her wrist increased. "Drop it, Natalie." The cross fell to the carpet and he released her hand with a smile that under other circumstances would have been charming. "No more little tricks like that up your sleeve, I trust?"

"No."

"Good." He traced her cheek and the line of her jaw with a fingertip; Nat tried to pull away but there was nowhere to go. "Not that I would expect you to tell me if you had. A pretty face, a sharp mind, a stubborn will...Nicholas never could resist that particular combination."

"Not that it's any of your business," Nat shot back, too quickly, "but Nick and I are best friends, ***period.***"

"Really?" The intruder chuckled. "He must be losing his touch. Tell me, Natalie..." He leaned closer, inches from her face, and she had the uncomfortable sensation of falling despite the solid wall at her back. "What do you find most fascinating about him? His strength, his power? The fact that he has lived nearly eight hundred years and could go on living forever?"

"His humanity," Nat returned evenly. "In spite of all that, he's still a man, a good man, and he wants to live like one again. And I'm helping him do just

that."

The strange vampire's surprise seemed genuine. "He's trying to cross back over? The fool! Why?"

"Because he doesn't want it any more, why else? Because he's had his fill of death and darkness. He wants to live again."

"And you are helping him." A smile spread slowly across her captor's face; Nat didn't like it at all. "Oh, dear doctor, this is all too perfect."

"What is?" Nat demanded, her temper getting the better of her efforts to keep cool and rational. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

*"I want **you**, Natalie," he replied, not very helpfully. "You see, I owe Nicholas a debt that is long overdue. I came here tonight intending simply to kill you...but now I have a better idea." Abruptly, unexpectedly, he kissed her. She tried to turn away but found her muscles unwilling to cooperate. She was falling again, vertigo spinning her well-reasoned arguments out of reach. **Get out of my head!** she thought fiercely, trying to push him away.*

Unperturbed, he stood back a moment, studying her with a hint of a smile. Then he leaned over again, murmuring in her ear, "You could live forever, Natalie."

"No!" Desperately she shoved at him again, succeeding only in pressing herself against the wall. He wouldn't budge.

"You can't tell me you've never thought about it," he went on. "Never wanted to experience it for yourself, if only so you can truly understand when Nicholas confides in you? And you want to understand, don't you?"

"I understand that it's made Nick miserable," she insisted, "and it made my little brother kill five people and then attack me so he could go after his wife. I want no part of it."

"Yet if Nicholas hadn't chosen it, you would never have known him at all," he pointed out. "He would be long dead, probably on the point of some Saracen's sword. He would never even have become the man you know, Natalie. One can learn a great deal in eight centuries, not all of it bad."

He was talking her in circles, dammit; somewhere there had to be a way out of that loop. Until she found it, though, what could she say that he couldn't turn against her?

Before she had a chance, he continued, "Will you stand there and tell me you've never felt that temptation, Natalie? Surely you have the strength of will your brother lacked. With all the time you have spent with Nicholas, all the things you have learned, you've never heard the siren call of immortality?"

"No."

"Never wanted to learn more, to know the things Nicholas cannot explain to you?"

"No." Nat cursed silently, hearing a sliver of doubt creep into her tone.

"Never looked at some pitiful corpse on your examining table and wished you never had to fear that fate?"

"No. Not at that cost."

"I don't believe you." He moved to kiss her again; she twisted out of the way, successfully this time--for all the good it did; he simply turned her face toward him again. "You answer too quickly, Natalie. Are you absolutely certain, certain to your soul, certain in the very face of death, that what I offer holds no fascination for you at all?" She started to answer, and he placed a finger on her lips. "Think carefully. You could have all the time in the world to find all the answers you wish--perhaps even find a way to work your miracle, bring Nicholas back to mortality and yourself as well." He kissed her once more, and she failed to pull away. "Or you could die tonight, and all those hopes die with you. Is that what you want?"

Her answer could barely be heard, even by his sharp ears. "No."

And in that moment she was lost.

"And the next thing I remember is your voice, telling me I had to wake up," Nat concluded quietly. "It was so strange, like swimming through tar to get to you. And you know the rest--better than me, I think. It's all pretty vague until I got my head together here, after you gave me..." She couldn't say it, and he wasn't about to press. "I had no idea... Nick, is that how it always goes? The mind games, I mean?"

"Usually." He rubbed nervously at the stubble on his chin. "He had to make sure you'd fight your way back, make you want it, at least for a moment. When you're brought over, you don't just wake up a vampire. There's no guarantee you'll wake up at all; it takes a very strong person with a very strong will to live--and a very strong fear of death, which isn't quite the same. He had to push you over that edge." Grasping her hand, he added, "It probably won't help much, but I wish I'd been as hard to convince."

Nat shrugged. "The end result is the same."

Lacking an answer for that, Nick asked her instead, "Nat...would you know this guy if you saw him again?"

"Anywhere," she replied, her voice taking on a hard edge.

"Good. Because I know just where to start looking."

*

Before they even reached the door of the Raven, Nat was wincing and pressing her hands over her ears.

"I don't know how she can stand having it this loud all the time," Nick told her. "Listen, I'll keep talking; focus on that and you can tune the music out. It just takes a little practice; and we shouldn't be here too long."

Frowning a little in concentration, she took her hands away from her ears. "I hope not. What are we doing here, anyway? You don't think he'd just be hanging out waiting for us to find him?"

"No, but he's probably been here," Nick answered. "And even if he hasn't, Janette makes it her business to know everything about everyone. Of course, we still have to convince her to tell us; she can be a little funny about that, as you may have noticed."

Looking around doubtfully at the club's crowd, Nat shrugged. "We seem to be in your element. Lay on, MacDuff."

Nick was about to protest, but something in her manner worried him. She was too calm, too quiet; and without knowing what was happening beneath that surface, how could he help her? He owed her so much, and now when she needed his support...

"Natalie?" Janette's surprised query came from behind them. "Then who was he talking..." She trailed off as she got a closer look at the other woman. "Ah, now I see. I thought he meant he had killed you."

"Didn't he?" Nat returned.

"He *who*, Janette?" Nick asked impatiently. "And if you knew something, why didn't you tell me?"

"Do you honestly think I would want to be the bearer of those tidings, Nicholas? It isn't as if you wouldn't find out, and frankly I didn't want to be around when you did." She turned on her heel and led them to a corner table away from the center of activity.

When they were all seated, Janette continued, "It's Paul you're looking for. He was in here last night, boasting that he had paid a visit to 'Nicholas's mortal lady.' He said to tell you to consider the scales balanced."

"What scales?" Natalie asked.

Nick shifted uncomfortably, replying, "It's a long story. I'll explain later."

"You've been caught in the middle of a very old argument indeed," the dark-haired woman said. "And I suppose it makes a certain sort of sense that he brought you over instead of killing you, since no doubt you and Nick both think this is worse."

"And I suppose you think it's just peachy."

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Janette shook her head. "I have never been your enemy, Natalie, and I'm certainly not going to start now. Like it or not, you are one of us, and you can count on me as a friend. Remember that if Paul tries to press his claim as your master."

Nick hardly needed to look at his friend to know she bristled at the term, and he didn't blame her. "What kind of master takes her by force and leaves her on the floor to fend for herself?" he demanded.

Janette's glass stopped in midair, the dizzying lights of the dance floor reflected in its dark red depths. "He did that?"

"He did that," Nick confirmed. "It was sheer luck that I reached her in time; he obviously meant for her to wake up alone."

"The fool!" Janette hissed. "Would he have her go mad just to spite you?"

"Apparently."

"He deliberately let me think he had killed her, then. He guessed I would alert you, or go to her myself if you couldn't be found." Recovering her detached air, Janette turned her attention back to the new convert, who was frowning intently at the other's glass. "Natalie? Is something wrong?"

Hand on her shoulder, Nick asked anxiously, "Nat? Nat, you're staring. You okay?"

"It smells like alcohol," the doctor answered, sounding faintly puzzled.

Janette smiled. "A little wine adds an interesting twist. Would you care to try it?"

"No," her guests said in hasty unison, Nat looking more than a little uncomfortable at the suggestion. Turning to Nick, she asked, "How come you never mentioned that? You can't get things down when I give them to you straight, but..." She trailed off, recalling that she was now in a similar position. "I should have thought of that." She hesitated. "Both of you, promise me... If I get out of control like Richard did..."

"We won't let that happen," Nick assured her.

"You'll stop me by whatever means are necessary," she finished flatly.

Janette nodded immediately, and Nick reluctantly followed suit. "Paul is an idiot," Janette declared. "He's gone much too far, and under the circumstances I doubt anyone would fault you for killing him."

Nat stared at her. "*What?*"

With a shrug, Janette went on, "I imagine that was Nick's first thought, but the right is yours."

"Janette--" Nick began, but he was interrupted when Nat pushed her chair back angrily.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," she fumed. "Don't you people think about anything else? Nick, I need some air. I'll wait for you in the car." Shoving her chair back under the table, she added to Janette, "Thank you for an enlightening discussion."

Ignoring the venomous sarcasm, the other woman replied, "This is your haven now too, Natalie, should you choose to take advantage of it."

"Don't bet on it."

Nick rose to follow as she stomped out, but a lace-gloved touch on his arm stopped him. "Let her go, Nicholas." She waved to someone across the room, nodding in Natalie's direction. "Fiona will keep an eye on her for a few minutes."

Rounding on her, he snapped, "Did you have to throw it in her face like that? She didn't want this, Janette."

"Then she wouldn't have come over."

"Don't play that game with me; I know it as well as you do." He sank heavily back into his seat. "But she wasn't supposed to learn it."

Brushing his cheek with the back of her hand, she told him softly, "Any mortal can be manipulated, Nicholas. The darkness is always there, and most dangerous when it is denied. You know that."

"Oh, yes," he agreed bitterly, "you and LaCroix taught that little lesson very well." Meeting her eyes, he added, "But it isn't enough, Janette; haven't *you*

learned yet? Maybe the light can never satisfy us, as you said. But neither can the darkness, and I won't pretend any longer that it does."

For a long moment they said nothing; then Janette looked away, predictably shifting the subject. "But it's done now. Are you ready for the responsibility Paul abandoned? Or will you do her more harm than good?"

"What do you mean?"

"She hasn't killed," Janette said flatly.

"And she isn't going to," Nick returned. "How can you even think that, when you know she's been trying to bring me back over?"

"Look at her, Nicholas, when you leave here. What you have given her is not enough." She pushed her glass across the table to him, and he eyed it warily. "If she wants to live as you do, that's her affair. But remember this: you had centuries to build your strength before you began this madness, yet even you feel the lack. She has nothing but her anger and her strength of will, and when one runs out the other will fail her. Will you let that happen?"

*

It was a mild evening, and he emerged from the club to find Nat in the Caddy's passenger seat with the top pulled down. She watched everyone who went by without much real interest, her expression again disturbingly composed. *The calm before the storm*, he couldn't help thinking. *She's still in shock*. But what did he expect?

She gave him a crooked little smile as he got in the driver's seat. "Hi."

"Hi." He hoped his answering smile was reassuring. "I think maybe it was a little too soon to drag you here."

Picking at a loose thread on her sleeve, Nat said, "I'm sorry I blew my stack. I guess she was trying to be helpful, huh?"

"In her own uniquely Janette fashion." Nick confirmed. "Look, Nat, don't take this wrong, but...I don't think you should be left alone yet. You'd be safest staying at my place for a while, just until you get adjusted and we make your place a little more secure."

"Okay. Can we swing by there so I can pack some clothes and things, and make sure Sidney has food and water?"

"That's where I'm headed, and then back home. You need some quiet."

"Now there's an appealing notion." She pulled off the thread she had been fidgeting with. "Nick, what did she mean by...his claim as my master?"

He didn't answer for a moment, the twitching of the little muscle in his jaw the only indication that he had heard the question. Finally he answered, "I wish she hadn't said that; she knows I wouldn't have stood for it in any case. But under ordinary circumstances, the master controls every step of the game, shapes the new vampire's values and habits in the process of teaching him or her to survive. Some take more advantage of that power than others, but it's universally accepted as the master's prerogative. It's all but impossible for a young vampire to defy his master, even if the master is abusing that power. You're just too dependent at the beginning."

Nat looked down at her hands, twined nervously in her lap. "So, if anyone fills that role in this case...I guess it's you."

"No." The word dropped like the blade of a guillotine. "I will *not* be manipulated into that." He sighed. "Although we may have to make some show to that effect to get the others to leave you alone." The car slid next to the curb in front of Nat's apartment building, and Nick took hold of her hands. "But I know, and I hope you know, that I'm going to help you through this as your *friend*."

"I know." She almost smiled. "And I have some idea, I think, how lucky that is for me. What you said about masters who abuse their power--the voice of experience?"

"Yeah." He looked down for a second, then met her eyes again. "LaCroix delighted in controlling my life. *Nobody* will do that to you."

*

"I knew I should have given you a key." Nat fingered the splintered door frame, adding, "Now I know why you were talking about making my apartment more secure."

Shaking his head, Nick answered, "Actually, I kind of forgot I did that. I was thinking of your windows."

"Oh." She glanced around the apartment; Paul had left her in a corner sheltered from the windows, but mostly she'd be in trouble. "I see what you mean."

There was an awkward pause, then Nick said, "Come on, let's get your stuff packed."

Nat said little as she moved from closet to suitcase to dresser, absently scratching Sidney between his ears, answering her friend's attempts at conversation in two or three words. Tossing her toothbrush and a small cosmetic bag on top of the clothing, she swung the lid down. One catch clicked shut, but the the other resisted. "This damn thing," she muttered, pressing down on the corner of the suitcase lid, which obligingly caved in beneath her hand. She jumped back as if burned, staring at the offending piece of luggage.

"Hey, take it easy," Nick told her, quickly opening the suitcase and popping the dent back from the inside, then closing it. "See, good as new."

"Glad one of us is."

"Nat--"

"No, no, I'm okay." She flashed a bright, patently artificial smile. "I'm fine."

Nick let it pass, wishing he knew what else to do. He could think of at least a dozen reassurances one gave to a doubtful, upset convert; too bad he didn't buy them himself. "All right," he said instead, picking up the suitcase. "Shall we?"

On the way back through the living room, Nat stopped abruptly. Nick followed her intent gaze to a glint of gold on the carpet, resisting the urge to stop her as she crossed and crouched by the necklace.

She hesitated before picking it up by the broken chain; then, with a determined set of her jaw, laid the cross in the palm of her hand. She held it for several seconds, then dropped it with a little cry of pain, pulling the injured hand close to her chest.

Nick was at her side in a flash, wrapping a supportive arm around her shoulders. "Let me see."

Slowly she opened her hand to reveal the angry-red, blistered mark. "This is really happening," she said, a sob creeping into her voice. "I'm really--"

At last the dam had broken. "Go ahead and cry, Nat," Nick told her, holding her protectively. "It's about time."

After a few minutes the pent-up sobs were spent, and Nat pulled back from the hug. Shaking her head, she brushed her fingers over the burn in her palm. "Why?" she whispered.

"Because I did a very foolish thing a very long time ago," Nick replied. "And because you're the most important person in my world." Wrapping her in his arms again, he went on, "Do you have any idea how much I value your unfailing faith in me, in my humanity? I've been ready to give up so many times, and you're always there to remind me that what matters is not what I am but what I do, and what I *want* to be." He clamped down firmly on his own tears; he needed to anchor her right now. "You have to hang on to that faith, Nat, now more than ever. I still need it, and so do you. But we'll make it--*you* made me believe that."

Nat laughed shortly. "I wouldn't let you give up, so now you're getting even, huh?"

"Now *that* sounds like the Natalie Lambert I know."

"Good. Then you won't be surprised when I start bombarding you with questions."

Holding up his hands in mock surrender, Nick said, "Okay, I give up. But can

we go to my place and sit on the furniture?"

"On the way, then."

"Done." He gave her a hand up and picked up her suitcase while she retrieved her purse from where it had fallen--had that been just the previous night?

Examining the door frame more closely, they discovered that only the heavy deadbolt had damaged it; the regular lock had merely bent, and still had something to slide into when straightened.

"My landlord's gonna *love* this," she chuckled, locking the door. "At least it isn't noticeable from the outside."

"Don't worry, I'll pay for it."

"Great. How about explaining it?"

He shrugged, putting on his best wide-eyed-innocent face, and Nat cracked up.

"You missed your calling," she informed him. "You should have been a pool hustler."

"Who says I haven't been?"

"Point taken. Have you?"

"Maybe."

That earned a sigh of semi-serious exasperation, and as they got into the car she said, "That's the last sidestep I'll let slide tonight, Nick."

"That's the last one you're going to get," he answered, mischievous grin fading. "You have a right to know why this mess has happened."

*

"LaCroix can go burn on the hearth, or in Hell for all I care!" Paul stomped into the keep, flinging his sodden cloak to the floor at the feet of a startled Janette. "And what are you staring at, wench?"

Pulling herself up arrow-straight, she retorted icily, "Have a care, Paul. This is still my house."

*To her consternation, the dark-haired man swept her a low, mocking bow and burst out laughing. "Your pardon, **my lady**, but it seems to me LaCroix owns this chateau and everything in it, including the two of you!"*

"And what makes you so different?" Nicholas demanded, picking up the other's cloak and hurling it back at him. "Do you think that by throwing a child's tantrums you can be free of him? Bad-tempered children earn only punishment, Paul."

*"Oh, this is a rare joke!" the newest member of the strange household snarled. "So much the child am I that our **master** will not deign to threaten me himself, but entrusts that task to his fallen knight, a favored son if ever there was one!" Before Nicholas could respond, he continued, "Of course, it is an improvement over being threatened by his whore."*

Between one heartbeat and the next Janette closed the distance between herself and the younger vampire. "What did you call me?" she whispered dangerously.

*"I have lost any fear of you, whore," Paul shot back. "You have already done me all the harm in your power, by luring me into this. For all his promises and all your pride, you have only freedom enough to serve his purposes. Tell me, do you keep a tally of the fools you have bedded before LaCroix brought them over or sent them to Hell?" He turned away from her contemptuously, crossing the few steps to Nicholas. "Though one is much the same as the other, eh, **brother**?"*

He was answered by a savage cuff that sent him crashing to the floor. "Enough!" the blond man roared. More calmly he added, "Just do as he asks, Paul, or we'll all regret it."

*Shocked out of the better portion of his rage, Paul rose slowly to his feet. "You fear no one else in Creation, Nicholas. Why are you so cowed by **him**?"*

*"We are not all equals here, Paul," the elder vampire replied evenly. "Take that as you will, but **never** forget it."*

"Perhaps he needs reminding."

Paul took a step backward, eyes wide, and Nicholas could not suppress a slight shudder at the deceptively soft voice over his shoulder. LaCroix was smiling as he

approached his newest "child," a sure sign that all was not well.

"Where is the girl, Paul?" the master asked almost casually. "Where is your golden angel?"

With a visible effort Paul met the unblinking ice-blue gaze. "Safe at home, where she will remain."

"Foolish child," LaCroix whispered, still smiling. "Has Nicholas been telling you how dangerous it is to defy me? You should heed his advice; he has seen how very short immortality can be." Janette shrank a little at this, and LaCroix gave her a slight nod before continuing, "You need a lesson, Paul. Learn it well." Then he turned back toward the door, calling, "Aurelie! Come in; he's waiting for you."

"Demon!" Paul hissed.

"As are we all," LaCroix agreed equably as a girl of about fifteen stepped shyly into the room, a fragile creature of spun gold and silk.

Little wonder Paul had lost his heart, had refused to bring her here to be consumed by their dark world. She seemed truly an angel; enormous blue eyes, clouded a little by LaCroix's hold on her, shone with the utter innocence their master so loved to destroy. "Why did you not meet me in the garden?" she asked, running to Paul. "I almost gave up waiting, but then your friend..."

"He is no friend of mine, Aurelie," he interrupted, placing himself between her and LaCroix. "Come, this is no place for you. I must see you safely home."

"He said you killed my lady," the girl told him fearfully. "Father Ambrose told us it was a demon had taken her, a monster in the guise of a man. Sure you are not such a one, monsieur?"

Glaring at LaCroix, he answered, "You mustn't listen to him, little one. He knows only lies."

"Is this a lie?" the master vampire asked, displaying his fangs and predatory yellow eyes. "And Paul is just the same."

Aurelie shrieked, looking from Paul around to the three strangers and back again. Slowly she backed away from the dark man, apparently deciding that Janette was the safest quarter. "My lady, please..."

"I cannot protect you," the woman told her flatly. "Perhaps Nicholas will."

Following Janette's nod, Aurelie ran desperately to the former knight. "Monsieur? Help me, save me, please!"

Nicholas hesitated, then took her little hands. "If I can," he told her, cupping one cheek in his hand and holding her eyes, trying to calm the panic he saw there, panic edging on madness. "Hush, now." She quieted, and he looked over at the others. "There is only one escape for her now, Paul," he said, forcing the sorrow he felt out of his voice. "She will only go mad if she lives."

"You callous bastard!" Paul cried. "You're no better than he is!"

Aurelie jumped at the angry voice, and Nicholas struggled to keep her quiet. "What would you have me do?" he demanded tightly. "It's too late, Paul. She has seen too much. Your innocent angel is already gone." With this last he shot a searing glance in LaCroix's direction, the most he ever dared. "I warned you that you would have no choice; she need not have gone through this."

Paul glowered from LaCroix to Nicholas and back again. "Release her," he insisted. "Aurelie, sweetling, come here."

Reluctantly Nicholas complied, but the girl cowered against him, staring wild-eyed at Paul. "Please, monsieur, don't let him near me!"

*Instinctively Nicholas put comforting arms around the terrified girl, and Paul swept across the room and yanked her away. "**Cochon**, I said let her go!"*

Utterly panicked, she screamed and thrashed as he led her to the door, paying no heed to his attempts to calm her. "No! Get away! You're hurting me!" Wriggling free, she fled again to Nicholas.

*Furious, Paul started across the room to them, but LaCroix intercepted him. "I have had enough of this game," he declared. Without taking his eyes off the dark man, he ordered, "Nicholas, deal with her. And I will deal with **him**."*

Aurelie clung tightly to him, and the panicked rush of her heart drowned out

the protests of his own. No reason remained in the great blue eyes pleading up at him; whatever notions he had briefly entertained of finding some other solution were gone now. "Quiet, little one," he murmured, holding her gaze once more. "You will never hurt again."

Some hours later a dark figure slipped through the early-morning shadows to a tiny, windowless tower room. As silently as possible Nicholas turned the pilfered key in the lock and pulled the door shut behind him.

"You did it, didn't you?" Paul's voice was tired, drained of anger, but indelible hatred ran beneath the surface. "She ran straight to you to die."

He could not deny the accusation. "There was no other way," he replied, the excuse hollow and unconvincing to his own ears. "You have to get away, Paul, now. He means to destroy you."

A short, harsh laugh answered him. "Do you think this will balance the scales? Oh, no, my friend, this debt will be paid."

Listening apprehensively for a step on the stairs, Nicholas said, "If you want to live to have your revenge, for pity's sake fly as far and as fast as you possibly can before the sun rises--or you will be watching it from the stocks in the courtyard!"

"Very well, enjoy your gesture," Paul told him icily. "But let me offer you a piece of advice in return." In a quiet, lethal voice, he went on, "Pray that you never hold any mortal dear, Nicholas. Because you may be certain I will be there."

*

"So," Nick asked after a moment, "do you hate me yet?"

"Will you stop?" He hadn't been able to face her throughout the shameful tale, afraid of her reaction; now he looked over at her in surprise. "Nick, in all the time I've known what you are, known that you have killed, have I ever condemned you for it?"

"No."

"No. Because what matters to me is who you are *now*. Did you really think telling me details would change that?" She shook her head. "You really thought I would blame you for what happened to me."

"*I* do."

"You're impossible." At his questioning look, she amended, "No, I don't mean that. And don't you start thinking it either."

"I'll try," Nick conceded. "Now, as long as I promised not to sidestep, what else can I embarrass myself with?"

Frowning slightly, Nat asked, "What about Janette? I mean, you've never really said...what is she to you?"

A shadow passed over his face, and she was almost sorry she had asked. "Now there's a loaded question. Once...LaCroix's pawn, the bait for his traps. Now...I don't know." He shook his head. "For a long time I blamed her for drawing me into this, but she was as much his victim as I was. He sold her on all the same lies; the sad part is that she still believes them. Or if she doesn't, she's afraid to admit it."

"I'm sorry."

"Me, too." Nick seemed lost in thought for a moment, then his gaze focused on the window. "Sun's coming up."

Overriding Nat's objections to putting him out, Nick insisted she take the bedroom and let him sleep on the couch. "You'd better call in sick. What could keep you out for a few days, without having to go to the hospital or anything?"

"Strep'll work," she answered. "I'd be pretty miserable at least until tomorrow, especially if I had a high fever. Which would also give you an excuse to stay home and take care of me, if that's what you have in mind."

With a nod, Nick chuckled. "Perfect. Schanke'll never let me hear the end of it, though; I finally use a sick day because somebody else is sick. He gives me a

hard time about you as it is, you know."

"Oh, really?" Nat stood by the window, watching the gradually-lightening sky. "And just what has he been--"

Nick rushed to her assistance as she leaned against the window frame, wincing. "You okay?"

"No, I'm not okay!" she snapped. "You killed the wrong girl six hundred years ago, so this wacko takes it out on me. I don't know if I'm madder because of me or because he knew damn well it would hurt you; but I'm mad as hell. And I'm tired...and I'm hungry. And I don't even want to think about that."

"Neither do I," Nick responded gently, "but we have to." He put the remote control for the blinds in her hand and headed for the kitchen, returning a moment later with two very civilized glasses.

She took hers wordlessly, glaring at it as if it were responsible for the whole disastrous situation, then returned her attention to the growing daylight.

"Penny for 'em?" he asked, laying a hand on her shoulder.

"Grief stages," Nat replied. "It's weird when you recognize things in yourself that you got really tired of taking notes on. It just occurred to me: mourning my mortality, I suppose?" She swirled the dark liquid in the glass. "Shock, denial, anger..." Finally, steeling herself, she raised the glass and took a few swallows, then glowered at it again. "I don't think I want to get to resignation, Nick."

*

He left the key in the middle of the floor in the tower room. Let LaCroix puzzle out for himself how it got there; he would find out anyway.

"Nicholas." The whisper from the shadows startled him slightly as he descended the stairs; but the peculiar French sound of it--"Ni-co-la"--was Janette's. "You're a sentimental fool," she chided him. "He could just as easily decide to destroy you."

"Let him."

Her eyes widened. "You don't mean that!"

"No, probably not. I'm too much the coward."

"You, a coward?" She drew closer to him. "My Nicholas, my brave Crusader?"

Catching the hand running up his chest, he replied sharply, "Don't call me that. That ended the night I met you, and you know it."

She laughed softly, back in her throat. "But we can be whatever we wish!"

"No. Only what he wishes."

She pulled away coldly, a storm brewing in her eyes. "Very well, Nicholas. Enjoy your brooding; you will be doing it alone."

Nicholas watched her stride away down the corridor. Part of him wanted to call her back, pretend to laugh with her at the harsh things she denied with such apparent ease. Another part wanted to chase after her, shatter her infuriating arrogance, remind her that she was just as vulnerable to desire.

He did neither, turning away instead to return to his own chamber and await LaCroix's caprices. At this moment he did not care enough even to wonder what punishment the master vampire would choose.

*

Nick rose from the depths of dreaming to find himself on the couch; it took him several seconds to remember what he was doing there. A glance at the clock on the mantel told him it was three o'clock. Much too early for him to be getting up; but he was wide awake now.

Soundlessly he padded up the stairs to check on Natalie. He had warned her that a vampire's dreams were as vivid as his sharpened senses; he hoped that hers were affording her some escape from the nightmare of reality, and not tormenting her further. A little smile quirked at the corners of his mouth at his friend's

sleeping face, innocent for now of anger or sarcasm or painful knowledge. "One of a kind" he had called her more than once, only half-teasing. Her questing mind and generous heart had led her to help shoulder his dark burden without a second thought. She knew how to draw out secrets he had never intended to reveal, and each time he was certain he'd lose her faith in him forever. But for whatever unfathomable reason, she continued to care for him, to trust him, offering her seemingly boundless strength to support him in his search for something that might well be impossible.

And this was her reward. There was no denying that *he* deserved such a blow, but why her? Where was the justice in punishing Nat for giving of herself, just because she chose the wrong person to receive that gift? And no matter how vehemently she denied it, the blame rested squarely on himself. He should never have allowed her to trust him, when he knew full well he didn't deserve it. If he had made more than a token effort to frighten her off when they had first met, her life could still have been safely normal; but now he had to admit he had hoped all along she wouldn't run away, this puzzling woman who had never for a moment feared him. He had betrayed her, as surely as if he'd attacked her himself. His desperate need for human contact, his longing for the daylight, had succeeded only in dragging Nat into the darkness he could not escape. The bargain had been struck, and like some latter-day Midas he destroyed everything he touched. His dearest friend's life, for instance.

Back on the main level he pointed the remote control at one of the windows, admitting a broad shaft of lethal light. Not long ago Nat had stood in that spot, fear for him adding force to the inadequate mortal strength she pitted against his halfhearted attempts at self-destruction. He should have gone through with it; at least then Paul would have left her alone. Instead he had let her draw him back to his precarious place among the living, remind him how he longed to feel the sunshine that had gilded her hair and lent its luster to her angry face. A simple thing, that unique glow on human skin; yet he had clung to the image, hoarded it--it had been so long since he had seen such a wonder. Now he strove to etch it even more indelibly in his mind, acutely aware that the sun might never fall on her face again, that it was now death to her as certainly as to himself. As certainly as it had been to her brother Richard, in this very same spot.

And it was for that reason he could not even consider that escape, though he felt as lost and hopeless now as he had after Erica's suicide. Maybe more so. But through that crisis and others, Natalie had been there for him; he could not repay her fierce loyalty by abandoning her.

*

Well after dark, and they had seen no sign of LaCroix. He had left the chateau, presumably to hunt, before either of them was up and about, and now they sat in silence in the great empty dining hall, occasionally facing each other across a corner of the disused high table.

It was Janette who broke the silence, her voice uncharacteristically subdued. "Why did you let him go, Nicholas?"

"I had to. I owed him that much for friendship, even if I hadn't taken the girl." He shook his head. "Why must he forever set us against each other, Janette? Why can he abide no loyalty unless it is to him?"

"Always questions with you," she chided, her brittle smile returning as she reached to ruffle his hair. "Things are as they are. Isn't it better to live with what we cannot change?"

He turned away. "I'm not so sure."

*"Nicholas." He looked up at the purring change in her tone, and she settled herself on the arm of his chair. "At least he has not set you and me against each other, **n'est-ce pas?**"*

"From the moment we met," he corrected. "He made sure I could never trust your motives; they always seem to be his, don't they?"

"Do you hate me for that?" she asked; the notion did not seem to cause her much concern.

"Sometimes."

She kissed the top of his head as if he were a child, then slid off the arm of the chair into his lap. "But right now?"

In spite of himself, he smiled at this. "No."

"That is all that matters, Nicholas," she whispered, leaning in to kiss him. "For right now is when we must live."

*

The sound of his alarm clock snapped him out of his reverie, followed immediately by a piercing shriek. Without a second thought he launched himself through the air to the loft, silently cursing himself for forgetting the thing was set.

"*Sh*, take it easy, Nat," he said as she shrank away from his sudden approach. "It's just me."

"Where'd he go?" she demanded, her voice shrill with panic.

"He was never here, Nat," Nick assured her. "It was just a dream. You're safe."

She relaxed then, reorienting herself to waking reality. "Sorry," she muttered, shaking her head. "I feel really stupid."

"There's nothing to apologize for," he replied. "It might have been a little easier if I had remembered to turn the alarm off." He nodded toward the headboard shelf and laughed, finally noticing the flattened remains of the clock. "Whoops."

"Did I do that?" she asked sheepishly. Turning back to him, she added, "Wait a minute. Did you fly up here?"

"Yes to both," he answered. "I don't suppose the first will buy me a reprieve from being lectured about the second?"

She frowned, "Nick, you know that whenever you do things like that..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "No, you're right. I don't have a lot of room to talk this time, do I?"

"Sure you do," he said, squeezing her hand and standing to head downstairs in a more orthodox manner. "You followed a human reflex. Unfortunately, you can't always do that now."

"I know."

Nick nodded acknowledgment, then retreated downstairs to afford her some privacy to dress. Glancing again at what was left of the alarm clock, Natalie muttered, "Stupid, stupid, stupid." In less than two days everything had spun out of control; the slightest action blew up in her face. She should have been able to turn off an alarm clock without acting like a hysterical child and demolishing the thing. She should have dealt with Janette's misguided advice without making a scene that had probably raised every vampire eyebrow in Toronto.

She should have found a way to escape from Paul.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she repeated, folding the pilfered scrubs she used for pajamas and returning them to her suitcase. "Stupid, stupid."

It occurred to her that Nick most likely could hear her; maybe she should cool it with the "stupid" motif. Wrinkling her nose at the mirror, she commented, "Too bad the reflection thing is bunk. I don't think I want one today." On the way down the stairs she added, "Oh, well. I'm out 'sick'; might as well be a slob, huh?"

"If you say so." Nick had always thought she seemed far more at home in her "college kid clothes" than in the professional attire she wore most of the time. Right now, though, she looked very small and lost in a gigantic Bluejays T-shirt, her face overwhelmed by a cloud of undisciplined curls. "Mind if I state the obvious, Nat? I don't think you're in a very good mood."

Natalie crossed her arms, and the observation was rewarded with something

resembling a laugh. "Brilliant conclusion, Detective. Need any help on your next big case?"

"Yeah, actually." He gave her a cock-eyed grin, and Nat wondered fleetingly just how long he'd had that little nervous habit of brushing his hand beneath his nose. "I was thinking of going grocery shopping. What do you want to throw in the blender this time?"

*

"You haven't changed, not really." The low voice over her shoulder caught Janette by surprise, not the sort of surprise she cared for. "You're still a whore, even with LaCroix gone."

Furiously she whirled on him. "You're not welcome here, Paul," she informed him in her most frigid tone. "And you're a fool if you think anyone will support what you've done."

"Oh, really? Since when do any of us have a problem with rightful revenge?"

"Why don't you ask Natalie?" Janette shot back. "Who you choose to kill or to bring over is your concern, but you should take more care how you go about it. She could have gone mad, Paul, called attention to us, endangered us all."

Paul laughed harshly. "Is that what this is about? Or is it just that you're on Nicholas' side?"

Favoring him with an icy smile, Janette replied, "Maybe it's just that I like Natalie, and I don't like you. I don't need any more excuse than that. This is my club, and I don't want you near it. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, my lady."

"Good. Oh, and one more thing," she added as he turned to go. "If you're wise, you won't compound your error."

"Meaning?"

"Leave Natalie be, Paul. You're already beyond your 'rightful revenge,' and Nicholas is not the only one who will oppose you."

Paul nodded politely. "I'll take your advice into consideration...but then, maybe I like Natalie too." Before she could respond, he flashed her an ironic smile. "But I'm not welcome here, isn't that what you said? Goodbye, Janette."

*

"Dammit!" There were three eggs left in the carton; two had made it into the blender and the rest were shattered and scrambled on the floor, the counter, and Nat's hands. And only one of her two successes had been complete; the other had necessitated five minutes of picking eggshells out of the goop.

"Maybe that's enough eggs," Nick suggested.

"I want three," she replied stubbornly. Taking a deep breath, she carefully picked up another egg from the carton, breaking it into the blender and throwing away the shell fragments without mishap. That operation finished, she realized she was holding her breath and let it out with a small whoosh.

"Brava."

Nat shrugged, washing remnants of egg from her hands. "Getting there, I guess. I think it's getting a little easier to control." Raking her hair back from her face, she turned to her less-fragile ingredients.

"Nicholas!" The sharp whisper startled both of them, sending Natalie nearly jumping out of her skin.

Catching sight of the slim shadow hovering outside one of the windows, Nick snatched up the remote control unit to admit her. "You know, I gave you the alarm code for a reason."

"Yes, to slow me down," Janette replied, unruffled. "I have news for you both...what *are* you doing?"

"Don't start with me, Janette," Natalie sighed. "I'm not in the mood." The elder's habitually polished movie-star glamour made her feel that much scruffier,

straining her patience with the familiar we-are-what-we-are attitude.

"But you're not seriously going to try and..." She trailed off at a glare from Natalie, contenting herself with a shiver of distaste. "Whatever."

"So what's this big news?" Nick put in.

"Paul was at the club tonight, making a nuisance of himself and implying that he isn't finished with Natalie."

Nat laughed shortly. "I don't see what else he could do."

"Take you away from Nick, for one thing," Janette replied, "and put you at risk of losing control, which we have agreed he intended from the beginning."

"I won't go."

"Do you think you would have much choice? Paul is old, experienced, and more than a little mad; and if he wants he *can* force you to follow him. He will control you as LaCroix controlled us."

"Not if I can help it." Nick's voice had taken on its deadliest quiet tone.

"We'll have to hope you can, Nicholas. Adopting another's convert is all well and good, but if he means to be her master in fact as well as--"

"She's her own master," Nick snapped.

"Very well, have it your way. But I think even Natalie knows that's just a matter of words. Though why you can't simply--"

"Because I don't want to be LaCroix, Janette! Why the hell do you think?"

"You had no such problem with Erica."

"And look what happened to her!"

"She made that choice, Nicholas, and she did so long after she was quite independent. Which Natalie will be, just as soon as she gains the strength and security to control her power."

"Oh, yeah. Like you did, Miss 'He's-very-disappointed'?"

Janette drew herself up, an indignant queen, and Nat would have sworn the temperature in the room dropped at least five degrees. "That's a cheap shot. And you are not LaCroix."

"Time *out*!" Natalie stepped between them. "In case you two have forgotten, this is *my* fate we're discussing here. I don't want to be a pain about it, but do you think you could play insult tag *after* we figure out what we're going to do about Paul?"

"Keep him away from you," Nick responded promptly.

"Sounds like a good start. How?"

Janette frowned. "I made it very clear that he's not welcome in the club, but we'll see how well he respects that."

"What we need to do is run him out of town," Nick said.

"Or destroy him. He's done enough to warrant it, to both of you. I doubt anyone would question your right."

"No." The new vampire shook her head firmly. "Don't you see, if we do that then somebody somewhere will decide they have to avenge *him*. Retaliation just keeps escalating, and I won't play that game. The cycle stops here."

"It's the way of our kind," Janette said.

"I don't want to go that way; you know that."

"Mortals turn the other cheek," the elder declared contemptuously. "For one of us it will only be seen as a weakness."

"Has it occurred to you that I don't intend to be 'one of us'?" Nat returned.

"You can't deny what you are, Natalie."

"Watch me."

The two women exchanged a long, measuring look, then Janette shrugged. "Have it your way; if you're bent on making yourself miserable, I can't stop you. And I'm sure you don't want my advice, but I'm going to give it anyway, in honest friendship: You can't be human. Paul has taken that away from you forever, and you should make him pay for that. But he has also given you things in return, and not the least of them is the fact that we look after our own." She cast a sideways glance at Nick. "Even those who try to turn their backs on us."

"What about Paul?"

"He put us all at risk by abandoning you. He has forfeited our support."

Natalie laughed shortly. "Vampire ethics."

Unperturbed, Janette replied, "Not such a contradiction in terms as you think. And you may find it useful to understand those ethics before you condemn them."

*

Janette started at the scratch of the opening door. "Nicholas, he's back!" she hissed. "What will you do?"

"Nothing." The former Crusader did not take his eyes from the fire, but he was no less aware of her agitation for his refusal to look at her.

"We cannot say the same for him. What if he decides to put you out in the sun in Paul's place?"

"Then I will try to escape," Nicholas replied flatly. "Or I will die. It's long past time, wouldn't you say?"

"No!" She placed herself in his line of sight, and reluctantly he met her eyes. "Don't keep antagonizing him, Nicholas. If he destroyed you, I--" She stopped short, looking over his shoulder, and her concern vanished behind her customary veil of ice.

"Are you ready to explain yourself, Nicholas?" LaCroix almost never raised his voice; it was never necessary.

"There is nothing to explain," the younger vampire replied, gaze fixed once more on the fire. "You have always told me that we must watch out for each other. Are you exempt from your own laws as well as those of mortals?"

"Are you judging me?" LaCroix returned. "You know better than that."

"I am in no position to judge anyone, am I?"

Janette resisted the to instinct to back away at the smile that crept across the master vampire's face. "Oh, I see. You're feeling pangs of conscience." He circled deliberately around the chair to stand in front of Nicholas. "Is that why you freed Paul? Are you trying to atone?" He hauled Nicholas up by the front of his shirt, forcing the other man to face him. "When will you learn that you are no longer a knight of the Cross? You are above those lies, Nicholas."

"Who are you to speak of lies?"

"Do you need to ask?"

"Yes. But you will never answer."

LaCroix shoved him back into the chair. "I am losing patience, Nicholas. Must you constantly be reminded of your manners?"

With a bitter laugh, Nicholas replied, "I'd rather not. Isn't it enough to be what you have made me without being forced to examine it?"

Shaking his head with exaggerated mock sorrow, LaCroix asked, "What are we going to do with you? What do you suggest, Janette?"

"What?"

The master favored her with a chilly smile. "Surely you can think of an appropriate punishment for our wayward friend here."

"I? But..."

"Choose quickly," he warned, "or I will. And I suspect my choice will be more...creative."

Looking uneasily from one to the other, she began, "LaCroix..."

"Choose!"

*

"I don't think we need to get into that," Nick interrupted, placing the blender pitcher of Natalie's concoction in the refrigerator.

Janette frowned at him. "She is not a child. Give her the knowledge to make her own choices."

"It's getting close to dawn," Nick sidestepped. "You should head home; thanks for the warning about Paul."

"If you insist, Nicholas." She made a point of striding toward the window to make her exit.

"Janette, wait." Her head snapped around, his apologetic tone not softening her expression. "I'm sorry. I appreciate what you're trying to do, but..." He trailed off, then started again. "Look, I should go to work tonight if we're going to avoid a lot of questions, but I can't leave Nat alone. Will you stay with her?"

She nodded curtly. "Of course."

"Janette?" Natalie spoke up, and the elder turned to her. "Thanks."

Nodding again, Janette gave her a slight smile and left by the door.

*

"Hey, Knight, you in there?" Schanke's voice on the intercom jerked Nick to wakefulness. "I come bearing chicken soup."

"Come on in, Schank; but keep it down, will you? Nat's trying to sleep."

"Sorry."

Moments later, Schanke emerged from the freight elevator clutching a large Tupperware container. "How's she feeling?"

"She's been better," Nick replied noncommittally.

Schanke nodded. "That's a given. Jenny's had strep a couple times; nasty stuff. She's taking her antibiotics on time and everything, right?"

"She *is* a doctor, Schank."

"Right. Well, I'll put this in the fridge, and when she's up you can tell her--"

"Hi, Schanke."

The visitor whirled around at the quiet voice just behind him, and Natalie jumped in response. "Jeez, Natalie, are you related to him or something?"

She flicked a glance at Nick before answering, "Sorry. What's in the bucket?"

"'Sokay." Schanke shrugged. "I think I'm just getting deaf in my old age." He held up the container of soup. "Myra's a chicken-soup genius, so when I told her the unofficial third partner of the Team Supreme was sick..."

"Thanks." She gave him a wan smile and accepted the container, placing it immediately in the fridge. "That's really thoughtful."

"Looks like you're feeling a little better." Natalie answered him with a shrug, arms crossed across her chest. "You know, you push yourself too hard. You might as well be a cop, as much time as you put in contributing to the brainwork."

"I guess I'm not satisfied with turning in my autopsy report and forgetting it. I think there's more to my job than that."

Schanke frowned slightly, noting her careless appearance and uncharacteristic nervousness. "And we appreciate it, no argument there. But maybe you should slow down a little."

"Thanks for the concern, Don, really; but I'll be fine." She flashed another crooked smile and headed into the living room area, arms still wrapped tightly across herself.

The others followed her, Schanke throwing a questioning look at his partner. "Natalie," he asked uncertainly, "are you sure this is about being sick, or did something else happen?"

She looked sharply at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you're not acting like yourself; and please let me know if this is way off base, but what you *are* acting like is every assault victim I've ever met."

Nick stepped forward. "Schanke--"

"You're crazy," Nat said at the same time, forcing a laugh.

"That's good to hear," Schanke responded, his tone making it clear he wasn't convinced. "Because I think you're too tough and too smart to do the victim-blames-herself syndrome and keep something like that to yourself."

"Drop it, Schank," Nick warned, his heart twisting at the look Natalie sent in his direction.

"Why?"

"It's not that simple," Nat told him, drawing her knees up and pulling back into the corner of the couch.

Schanke stood beside her, saying reasonably, "Trying to disappear won't make it go away, Natalie. But you got nothing to be ashamed of, and even though it's tough to go in and report--"

"I can't, Schanke!" she snapped, burying her face against her knees. "Just leave me alone, okay? You don't know what you're talking about!"

Nick had stood back, uneasily watching the exchange, but now he started forward. "Schanke, get away from her."

"What is *with* you guys? It won't help to--"

"I said *leave me alone!*" The blow caught Schanke squarely in the stomach as Natalie whirled on him, sending him crashing into the side of the stairs.

Nick crossed the room instantly and caught her before she was quite on her feet, pinning her arms to her sides.

"Let me go!"

"Not until you calm down," he told her firmly, pulling her down to sit on the floor. "Richard, Nat! Remember what happened to Richard." Abruptly she stopped struggling, and he took her face in both hands, meeting her changed eyes with sorrow but no surprise. "Keep it down, Nat."

"Oh, my God," she whispered as he hugged her tightly, giving her a chance to regain her human appearance.

"Schanke?" He looked over at his partner, who was still out of breath and staring at them in stunned silence. "You okay?"

The other man nodded, standing up slowly. "What the hell is going on, Nick?" he demanded in a hushed voice. "Her face--I thought I saw--"

"You did." Gently he pulled Natalie to her feet, her face still hidden against him. "Wait here a couple minutes, and I'll explain."

Schanke was about to say something else, but the anguish in the coroner's now-normal eyes as she turned to him stopped him short. "Schanke, I..."

"Later, Nat," Nick told her, leading her to the loft stairs. "It's only one in the afternoon; you should be asleep."

"What are you going to tell him?" she asked as they reached the bedroom.

"What I should have told him months ago," he replied. "The truth. Now get some rest, and let me worry about it."

*

To Nick's surprise, Schanke said nothing throughout the bizarre recitation, through the revelations of Nick's own age, the true fate of Natalie's brother Richard, and what had happened to Natalie herself. Even Nick's vague admission that he had once killed to sustain himself elicited only a fleeting look of shock before his partner returned to the poker face Nick recognized from more than a few midnight interrogations.

At length the tale was told, and after a pause Schanke took a deep breath. "That's a hell of a lot to digest all at once," he said finally.

"Yeah."

"But...it explains a lot."

"Yeah."

Schanke glanced up the stairs, now beginning to look distinctly uncomfortable. "And it's all true, isn't it? And she could have...killed me."

"Yeah."

"Man, oh, man, oh, man." Schanke leaned against the back of the couch. "When Norma was going on about how you weren't in the computer, and some of the times on duty..." He shook his head. "Still, it's tough to swallow, even after seeing... I mean, that kinky friend of yours, that Janet person with the nightclub and the MTV girl wardrobe--"

Nick almost laughed as he watched the wheels turning in his partner's head. "Her you'd believe, right?" At Schanke's hesitant nod, Nick went on, "I probably

shouldn't tell you this; try not to let on that you know if and when you see her again, or I'll never hear the end of it. When I walked into this trap Janette was the bait. It wasn't really her *fault*, but...well, it's complicated." He shrugged. "Anyway, her club is a refuge and contact center for us. She got so upset when you were snooping in her cellar because you nearly stumbled across one of her house guests."

Schanke caught himself putting a nervous hand to his throat. "If I had, would she have--?"

After considering a moment, his partner replied, "She says she would have, but I have my doubts. Six months ago, yes, without a second thought. But six months ago she would never have harbored you at all."

"Why the change?"

"I don't know. I like to think it's her real personality coming out now that she isn't always looking over her shoulder for LaCroix." He tossed Schanke a wry smile. "Holly, on the other hand, would probably have killed you before you could blink. She's pretty paranoid."

"And she was behind that door."

"Mm-hmm."

"I've walked into a mell of a hess," Schanke sighed. "So...what's the plan?"

Nick blinked. "What?"

"How do we get the sonovabitch who did this to Natalie?"

"*We* nothing, Schank," Nick told him firmly. "Haven't you been paying attention? You are not getting involved in this."

"I would venture to say that I'm already involved."

"Well, it's not going any further. I told you so you'd know why you need to stay out of it!"

"Uh-uh, partner," Schanke insisted. "No way am I going to sit back and pretend none of this happened. There has to be something I can do."

"No. Not without making you a target too, and that's the last thing I want."

That stopped Schanke short. "You're blaming yourself for what happened to Natalie, aren't you?"

Nick looked away from him. "Of course. It's my fault for involving her in my problems."

"Seems to me she knew what she was getting into," Schanke ventured.

"Not really. I mean, I told her the basic facts, but I didn't really make her understand the risk to her." He laughed shortly. "I thought I could protect her, but the only way to do that would have been never to let her into my life in the first place."

Lacking an answer for that, Schanke asked instead, "So what happens now?"

"Now you go back on duty and *stay out of this*, Schanke," his partner told him. "I got careless and Nat paid for it. I won't allow that to happen again. I'm taking enough of a risk telling you as much as I have; I hope you understand how dangerous it is for you to know so much. Some of the others would say you know too much to live."

Schanke absorbed this, looking slightly ill. "Nick...you said you made Richard's wife forget all that stuff. You could have done that today, couldn't you? To me?"

Nick nodded soberly. "I could have."

"But you didn't."

"You're my partner, Schank. You have to know you can trust me, and so do I."

"Makes sense," Schanke agreed. "And...thanks." Glancing at his watch, he started to get up from the couch. "And now back to everyday--ow!"

"What is it?" Nick jumped to his partner's assistance. "You got slammed pretty hard. I think you might be hurt worse than you thought."

"Yeah," Schanke gasped. "I think maybe I broke a rib or two."

"You didn't," came Natalie's desolate voice from the stairs. "I did." Descending the rest of the way, she added, "I couldn't sleep, and I couldn't help overhearing." She hesitated at the foot of the stairs. "I'm still a doctor,

Schanke, if it's okay..."

Both of them looked at Nick, who nodded, and Schanke answered, "Sure."

He winced as he moved to take off his jacket, and Natalie strode across the room, her professional demeanor returning for the first time. "Careful, you're going to make it worse," she admonished him, gingerly pulling the jacket off. He flinched as she checked over his ribs. "Hold still, willya? I don't bi--" She cut herself short, realizing what she was saying. "Never mind."

The impromptu examination continued in silence, until Natalie informed him shakily that he had two broken ribs and some minor internal bleeding. "I'd rather you didn't have to drive yourself to the ER, but you should get there soon, and we..."

"Well, it's going to do me a lot less damage than it would you," Schanke quipped. "And I'm in no hurry to see either of you go up in flames, thanks. I'll be okay." He paused. "Now, as for how I'm going to explain to the captain just how I managed to break ribs on my lunch hour..."

"You'll think of something, Schank," Nick assured him.

"Uh...yeah."

*

"*Bonsoir, mon coeur, mon amie.*" Janette was all smiles as she swung aside the elevator door, waving a wine bottle in her other hand. "Sorry, *cheri*, but I simply don't want to consider trying to stomach that stuff you keep around tonight. Would you two care to join me?"

"No, thanks," Nick replied. "I have to go to work."

Natalie turned around on the couch to give Janette a dubious look. "Where did it come from?"

The dark-haired woman's smile did not fade as she clucked her tongue, replying, "My, aren't we particular? You needn't worry; nobody died for it."

"But it's human, right?"

"Well, of course." Janette made an impatient noise. "Really, Natalie, why is this any different from a mortal transfusion? You even did that for Nick. Would you have argued before this if you needed it in a hospital?"

"Is that where it came from?" Nat persisted.

"As a matter of fact, yes," the other answered. "Nicholas is not the only one with human connections, you know. It isn't safe to live as we once did."

"It wasn't then," Nick put in. "But there were alternatives then, too. We just didn't take them. And not everyone always does now, do they?"

Janette shrugged. "Everyone is careful."

"That isn't the point."

"Not for you, darling. And I know not for Natalie. But you said you had to go to work, *n'est-ce pas*?"

With a sigh, Nick instructed, "Don't give her a hard time, Janette. Just agree to disagree, okay?"

"Whatever you say."

He shook his head, turning to Natalie. "You going to be okay?"

Smiling in answer, she said, "I'll be fine. I don't think we're likely to pull each other's hair out or anything."

"Okay." He squeezed her hand. "Hang in there, Nat."

"I will."

When he had gone, Janette went to the kitchen and pulled two glasses from the cupboard. "You're hungry," she said matter-of-factly. "I don't care whether it's from my supply or his, but you're going to have *something*. Mine will do you more good, though."

"What do you mean?"

"I knew he wouldn't have told you." Janette poured her glass full from the bottle she had brought. "Any blood can sustain us, but we gain the most strength from human. Strength you might need if Paul gives you more trouble. Strength to

help keep your power under control."

Natalie considered this a moment, then shook her head. "No. That's not a taste I want to acquire."

"Suit yourself." Janette poured a glass from a bottle in Nick's refrigerator and handed it to Natalie, then put her own bottle in the fridge before settling at the table across from the coroner. "Well, isn't this cozy?"

"I do appreciate this, Janette," the new vampire told her. "I know you only put up with me for Nick's sake, and--"

"You shouldn't make assumptions about other people's motives," Janette interrupted her. "I see no reason why we can't be friends."

Nat chuckled. "You mean besides diametrically opposed philosophies of life?"

"Don't be so sure of that either. Oh, different perspectives, yes; but isn't that what makes the world go round?" She smiled, taking a sip from her glass. "At any rate, it would hardly make sense for me to dislike you just because you agree with Nick...or for that matter just because he loves you."

Blinking in surprise at the sudden shift, Natalie asked, "Why do you say that?"

"Because I've known him far longer than you have, and I know the signs. He's always refused to acknowledge it for your safety; but then, that isn't a problem anymore, hm?"

Natalie shifted uncomfortably. "No offense, Janette, but I think you're really off on the wrong track."

"Maybe." Janette swallowed the last sip of her supper. "But I was telling you a story last night, wasn't I?"

"Yes, you were. Why did Nick stop you? What happened?"

"Something else for that conscience of his to torture him with."

*

"Choose!"

"All right." Janette stood straight and looked LaCroix in the face. "I don't think it's necessary to put him out in Paul's place," she went on coldly, "but perhaps a taste of the sun. Just so he will remember."

LaCroix nodded, giving her an approving little smile. "Not bad, my dear. Not bad at all." Then the smile went as cold as his pale eyes. "But a good idea can always be improved upon."

Without warning he seized her by the wrist and stalked toward the tower stairs, dragging her behind him.

"What are you doing, LaCroix?" Nicholas demanded, trailing after them.

The master vampire ignored the question, pulling Janette into a bare chamber near the top of the keep. He threw open the shutters on the single window, standing clear of the sunlight and turning to the apprehensive former knight. "Pay close attention, Nicholas."

"LaCroix, no!"

Ignoring him again, LaCroix pulled back Janette's sleeve and thrust her hand into the light. Steam rose from her skin, slim fingers flexing convulsively as she suppressed a gasp of pain.

When LaCroix made no move to let her go, Nicholas rushed forward to intervene. "Stop it, LaCroix! There's no reason to hurt her!"

Without sparing him a glance, LaCroix backhanded him away and pushed Janette's arm into the sunlight nearly to the elbow. She clamped her jaw firmly, but not before another gasp escaped her. From the corner of her eye she was aware of Nicholas picking himself up from the floor, but she could not pull her eyes away from the smoke streaming from her own pale skin. She felt oddly detached from the sight, as if she were not looking at her arm at all. The same could not be said for the pain, however, and as it built rapidly to intolerability she bit savagely at her lip to keep from crying out, knowing LaCroix would taunt her mercilessly for such a weakness. But the seconds passed, and he showed no sign of ending the

torment.

"LaCroix, please!" she begged at last, the words spiraling into a scream before she could prevent it.

"Leave her alone!" Nicholas rushed forward again, and LaCroix released her abruptly, without emphasis.

Nicholas looked over the burnt hand to be certain it was healing as it should, then gently pulled her sleeve back into place as LaCroix closed the shutters. Holding her close, Nicholas buried a hand in her raven hair, glowering at LaCroix over her head.

"Have I made my point, Nicholas?" the master asked mildly.

*

"My God," Natalie whispered, staring at Janette in shock. "Did he...was that kind of thing common?"

Her companion nodded, shuddering slightly at memories she seldom faced. "He knew from the beginning that Nick could be hurt most effectively by another's suffering, and I was convenient."

"And important to Nick," Natalie added. "So when he did something LaCroix didn't like, you paid for it."

"Something like that."

"Why did you put up with it? How could you stay in a situation like that?"

Before Janette could reply, both women started at the sound of the elevator. When the door slid aside, it was Paul who stood there. "Good evening, ladies," he greeted them congenially. "Oh, I'm sorry. Am I interrupting your girl talk?"

"How did you get in here?" Natalie demanded, anger covering a rush of fear.

"You mean the security system?" he asked, strolling across the room toward them. "You gave me the code; don't you remember?"

"I did no such thing!"

"It isn't your fault, Natalie," Janette said, placing herself between them. "He knows how to take what he wants."

Paul laughed shortly. "And you don't?"

Without answering, Janette snapped, "I advise you to turn around and go right back the way you came, and never look back."

"I don't think so." In the blink of an eye he passed by Janette to take hold of Nat's arm. "Hello, little girl. How are you enjoying your new life?"

She tried to get away, but he kept tight hold of her. "Why didn't you just kill me?"

Grasping her chin and forcing her to face him, Paul replied calmly, "You said you didn't want to die."

"I didn't want this!"

"Of course not. But as much as Nicholas valued your pretty neck, what is one mortal life really worth?" He smiled. "Ah, but the trust of an innocent soul...now there's a precious commodity. And even though your work meant examining day after day all the ways in which mortals can destroy each other, in your own way you remained as innocent as my Aurelie. What gives Nicholas the right to such a gift?"

"What gives you the right to take it away?" Janette hissed, pulling him away from Natalie. "Why should she pay for what Nicholas did centuries before she was born?"

"She hasn't," Paul shot back. "Not enough. Not yet." Suddenly he grabbed Janette, pinning her arms behind her back. "So chivalrous of him, to rescue his lady from herself. I should have left her where he couldn't find her. And now he has left you to help guard her precious innocence." Producing a match from his pocket, he struck with his thumbnail and held it a hair's-breadth from Janette's face. "Rather an ironic responsibility for a whore." Seizing a handful of her hair, he held the flame against her cheek, freeing her hands to push vainly at the hand holding the match.

"Damn you!" Natalie shouted, slamming into Paul with all her new strength and knocking him away from Janette. "She's dealt with more than anyone should have to, and so have I! Go away and leave us alone!"

"Well, well, the kitten has found her claws." Paul smirked, backing away calmly as Natalie advanced on him.

"Go away!" she repeated. "You got your revenge you were so obsessed with, and destroyed my life in the process! You give Janette hell for helping me, which she didn't have to do. You went way out of any imaginable bounds. And you are *not* my master, so *get out!*"

By now she had stalked him across the room until he stood with his back to the window by the fireplace, the infuriating smirk never faltering. "And what sharp claws they are, little kitten. But you're wrong; I gave you immortality and you belong to me."

"I don't want it and I don't want you! Get out!"

"A little kitten with a big meow," Paul taunted softly. "Make me."

"Natalie, don't!" Janette called, but it was too late. The coroner's scream of frustration and rage shifted into a vampire's growl as she threw herself again at Paul, sending them both through the window to the alley below.

"And so she's found her wings as well," he laughed as she alighted on her feet, not really noticing that she had done so. "Show your claws, kitten. Teach me a lesson."

Janette followed through the shattered window, landing in the alley as Paul threw the furious convert into the brick wall. Cracks appeared in the mortar behind Natalie's head, and she slumped to the concrete, stunned.

"Leave her alone!" Janette railed, clinging to the shreds of her authoritative dignity.

"Or what?" he asked in amusement, advancing on her. "You have never had any strength, my lady. You only put on airs."

"Hey, what's going on here?" A young man, about eighteen, ran into the alley brandishing a knife. "Picking on ladies, dude?" He looked Janette over appreciatively. "I wouldn't mind spending a little time with her either, but where I come from you *ask*. Are we gonna have a problem?"

"Oh, I don't think it will be a problem at all," Paul answered, taking a step toward him.

Natalie stirred, and the youth crouched beside her, eyes and blade still trained on the slowly approaching man. "Hey, you okay, lady?"

Still disoriented, she reacted to the nearby male voice with the speed of instinct, and before she could form a coherent thought the boy was dead.

"Well done," Paul congratulated her as she looked up from the body, not yet fully aware of what she had done. "Poor little kitten, she's lost her mittens, and can't control her claws. Quite unique, isn't it, Natalie--to feel the blood wash the light from your soul." This said, he favored each woman with an ironic little bow, then took to the air and left them in shocked silence.

*

Nick's Cadillac screeched to a halt at the curb outside the Raven. It was well after closing time, and the club was dark and nearly deserted as he sprinted inside.

"What happened?" he asked urgently the second he spotted Janette perched on a bar stool, a scarf draped over her head and one side of her face. "Why are you here instead of my place?"

"Paul happened," she answered simply. "He pushed her too far, and a mortal got in the way. I couldn't stop her and deal with him too."

"I should never have expected you to," Nick answered tightly. "She's my responsibility, not yours."

Janette shook her head, pulling the silk back up when it threatened to slip off. "You could not have prevented it either. It had to happen, Nicholas. She is

what she is, just as we are."

Instead of answering, Nick pushed the scarf back from her head, revealing the ugly burn on her cheek. "Oh, Janette."

"It's nothing, *cheri*," she told him lightly. "It will be gone in no time. It's Natalie who needs you now."

"Where is she?"

"In my office. No windows, no wood, nothing to start a fire. She wants to die, Nicholas, and she didn't even want to wait until you arrived. She's ashamed to face you." Nick closed his eyes, pain etched on his face, and Janette leaned forward to kiss him. "It will be all right, you'll see. She'll survive; that is what we do."

The sight that greeted him in the darkened office turned his spine to ice. Natalie huddled in the corner behind the desk, trying to make herself as small as possible or even to disappear.

Her head snapped up as he entered, despair peering out at him from behind the veil of wild hair, a smudge of blood still staining her chin. "I'm sorry," she whispered simply. Then she buried her face against her knees again.

Silently Nick crossed the room to sit beside her on the floor, drawing her into his arms.

"How can you stand to touch me?" she sobbed. "That poor kid... He was trying to help me, Nick! He thought Paul was...and I..."

"Hey, hey, *sh*. I know, Nat, believe me. I did it more times than I can count, remember? I understand. But your friends still love you, and we're not going to give up on you." Pulling a handkerchief from his jacket pocket, he did his best to wipe the tears and the traces of blood from her face. "Schanke's worried sick."

"Schanke's crazy," she returned. "I almost killed him!"

"But you didn't," Nick pointed out. "So you'll just have to put up with him worrying about you."

The halfhearted levity was a total failure, but that was no surprise. "Well, he doesn't have to worry," she said dully.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not moving from this spot until it gets light, and then I'm going outside."

"No!" Taking her firmly by the shoulders, he went on, "Listen to me, Nat. I'm the last person to downplay how serious this is, but you can't let it destroy you. You said yourself suicide is *never* the answer."

"I've been proved wrong a few times since then, haven't I?"

"I can't deny that," he admitted. "Everybody's wrong sometimes, whether you think you're allowed to be or not. I still think you're wrong a lot less than most people--and when you have been, it's usually because you're angry and scared and hurting. Like now. And believe me, you're wrong now."

Natalie shook her head. "This can't ever, ever happen again. And there's only one way to be sure of that; I know that now."

"That's not true!"

"It *is* true! Janette got distracted for a few seconds, Nick, and I was gone! She did her best with a responsibility that she didn't ask for, and I can't keep dumping it on her."

Nick looked away from her. "No. That was a mistake, and it wasn't fair to her or anybody else. But the responsibility is mine, Nat. I chose to take it on, and I swear I won't blow it again."

"What are you going to do, watch me every second?"

"If that's what it takes."

"I can't ask that of you." Nat drew her knees up more tightly against her chest, pulling away from him. "We have both worked too hard getting your life together for me to ruin it now."

"*My* life," Nick repeated, holding her again. "My choice. My gift to the friend who has always been there when *I* needed *her*." Smoothing back her tangled

hair, he continued, "If you're determined to die, you know I can't really stop you. But it isn't the only way, and it certainly isn't the best. And I truly believe you would cause more pain than you would prevent."

"I can't live like this," she sobbed quietly.

"Neither could I," Nick reminded her. "And whatever you think right now, I know you're strong enough to beat it. I'll be there to help you, I promise."

"I don't know..."

"Then don't do it," he urged.

She didn't answer for a moment, then said, "I never met Erica, but I think I understand her now. I couldn't believe that someone who could write that beautiful play, who was loved by so many people, could think she was a burden. But now..."

"Erica was wrong," he told her emphatically. "She was afraid of the world, afraid she couldn't keep making a place for herself in it. She was wrong for all the reasons you told me I was wrong when I considered following her. And for all the reasons you're wrong now."

Natalie lowered her head, madwoman's mane falling in her face again. "That's what I would say if I were you. I don't know yet if I believe it."

"Don't do it, Nat," he persisted. "Don't give up. You're stronger than that, I know you!"

"I wish I could be sure of that."

"Be sure. Or if you can't, at least wait until you can make a clear decision. You can't think rationally about this now; nobody could." He lifted her face to look at him, tucking her hair behind one ear. "It's your choice, Natalie. But death is a choice you can't take back. And not being sure is *not* a reason."

"No, it isn't." She took a deep breath, pulling together the scattered pieces of her composure. "So what do I do?"

"Get some rest," he replied. "Learn from your mistakes. Start fresh tomorrow. It's the only thing you *can* do, Nat. The only way to survive."

She laughed bitterly. "Survive. Is that all I can do now, Nick?"

"No. But you have to start there."

"And where do I finish?"

She had retreated further away from him, into the corner, sitting ramrod-straight with her mangled emotional armor locked tight, and this time he would not let her get away with it. "Where you finish is entirely up to you," he answered, pulling her back to enfold her in a secure hug. Forced to accept support, her brittle pretense of stability crumbled and she hid her face in his shoulder and cried.

Nick wanted desperately to tell her it was all right, to tell her anything that would halt the broken weeping and make her smile and hold up her head, make her the Natalie he knew again. But he had learned over the past two years that much of that was a brilliant facade, designed to reassure those she loved so they wouldn't notice her tearing out her heart for them. This time, whether she wanted it or not, she had to let someone else be the strong one. If he let her pretend now that everything was fine, she would continue to pretend until there was no hope of making it reality.

So he let her cry until there was no more crying left, until emotional exhaustion and a need to retreat from the bleak place her world had become took their toll, and she fell asleep with her face still buried against his coat. Carefully he shifted her to a more comfortable position, cradling her tangled head in his lap.

The office door swung quietly open, and he looked up to see Janette silhouetted against the dim daytime light of the club. "One of us who sleeps like a child," she mused, shutting the door behind her. "You have to take her away, Nicholas. She can't stay here; she has to start over somewhere new."

"I know." He shook his head. "What I don't know is where to go." After a moment he asked, "Where's Charlotte now? Still in London?"

"Denver." Janette pulled the desk chair next to him and sat down. "She opened a cafe downtown about a year ago."

"Denver," he repeated thoughtfully, then looked up at Janette. "I don't suppose you could--"

"I'll call her and make the arrangements now," she interrupted. "It's still two hours to dawn there, so I should be able to reach her. And I suppose you'll want to drive that relic of yours, so if we plan for you to stop in Detroit, then somewhere in Iowa, I think, then--"

"Janette." The tone of his voice stopped her cold, and she waited for him to continue. "That's not what I was going to ask."

A sad smile crossed her face and she reached out to touch his cheek. "I think I'd like to go with you, *cheri*; but we both know it wouldn't work. I am mistress here and I like it; I don't wish to play rivals with Charlotte. Anyway, her crowd isn't my style." She nodded at Natalie. "Which is why it's the best place for her."

"I know."

"Cheer up, Nicky; you know you'll be seeing me again. Just like the bad penny. When I get bored with this place. When Natalie doesn't need you so desperately."

"We still might find a way, Janette," he reminded her.

"To become human?" Janette shrugged. "Believe that if you like. I choose not to think about it." She leaned forward to kiss him lightly. "Surely you're not going to sit on the floor all day? There's an empty room straight back down the hall; get her to a bed and get some sleep yourself. I have to call Charlotte."

He stood up, carrying Natalie as if she were a little girl up long past bedtime. "I really owe you for this."

Laughing softly, without her characteristic sarcasm, Janette replied, "Have we ever truly kept track?"

*

"Naddie Naddie Naddie Naddie!"

"Go 'way, Richie, I'm coloring!"

"Read, Naddie!" the toddler insisted, unimpressed by big sister's artistic endeavors. "Fish, Naddie! Read read!"

*"That book **again**?" Natalie sighed with a degree of exasperation attainable only by a child of almost five. She practically knew it by heart, the first book she had ever read all by herself. She would rather try the new one with the cat in the hat, even though it was harder and she hadn't figured out all the words yet.*

But Richie never got tired of the fish book, and she could not resist his grin as he held it out to her in his chubby grubby baby hands. "Read, Naddie!" he pleaded.

"Okay, okay." She accepted the colorful book, taking Richie's hand to lead him to the big armchair where they always wedged themselves to read. "One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish," she began.

As usual, Richie's two-year-old attention began to waver about when they hit the funny-looking guy who said, "My hat is old, my teeth are gold..." On the next page he stood on one hand and said it all backwards, Natalie's favorite funny part. But by then Richie had wriggled out of the chair, heading for the bright square of sunlight on the living-room carpet. Something about that was dangerous, wasn't it? "No, Richie!"

And then he wasn't a baby any longer, but a man tall and strong. No, not just strong, but immortal, and drunk on power and the blood of five people. All because she couldn't let him go, couldn't accept the cruel twist of fate that sought to snatch him away. Nick had tried to warn her, tried to make her see reason, but she had hit him with every weapon in her considerable arsenal until he gave in.

"God made a mistake this time!" Had she really said that? Nick knew better, Nick who still believed he was damned, that no matter what he did he was fundamentally evil.

"Evil is a metaphysical condition," he'd told her that first crazy night when

chance brought him to her in a body bag. But she hadn't let him frighten her away, so certain that she knew better.

Just as she had been this time--how arrogant could you get? After all this time, more than she could really comprehend, Nick still knew God didn't make mistakes. For her, though, he had gone against his better judgment and done as she asked--what he would not do when Alyce Hunter begged him for it, or when Denise Ford died in his arms before he could fly her to help.

And now, too late, she understood why, as her cherished little brother ruthlessly slammed Nick and then herself aside in pursuit of his terrified wife. Natalie came to on the floor, halfway across the room, and hauled herself upright just as the sunlight struck Richard and he was gone.

*

"No, Richie!"

Nick started awake, disoriented for a split second to find himself sitting in an unfamiliar chair in an unfamiliar room. He hadn't intended to fall asleep, but Natalie had slept soundly through the day until now, which by his watch was about five o'clock.

He moved to the edge of the bed where she sat suddenly upright, shaking her head to clear away the last cobweb strands of dream. "Must've been a doozy," Nick said.

"You could say that." She pushed her hair back from her face. "I've made a decision," she told him, her voice rock-steady.

"And?"

"I don't want to die, Nick. I'm not giving up."

A broad grin split his face and relief flooded his voice as he answered, "That's the best news I've heard all week."

"Well, I hope so!" she chuckled, returning the smile.

A light knock sounded on the door and Janette poked her head inside. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine, thanks," Nat replied.

Their hostess nodded, taking note of the smudged, rumpled blouse the other woman still wore. "I'm pleased to hear that. Why don't I get you some clean clothes?"

Natalie raised an eyebrow. "No offense, but...is there anything in your closet you honestly think I could carry off without looking like a grade-A idiot?"

"Don't sell yourself short." Janette cocked her head, a mischievous smile lighting her face momentarily. "I'll see what I can do."

When she had gone, Natalie asked, "Why am I not sure I like the sound of that?"

"Oh, I don't know," Nick began, cutting off with a chuckle at her sharp questioning look.

*

"But why run away now?" The silk crepe halter dress Janette had produced for her was not exactly Nat's normal style, but she hadn't felt as foolish donning it as she had expected. The black silk rustled around her knees as she and Nick walked across the club. "I mean, I'm ready to pick up my life again, and you tell me we have to skip town?"

"You really think you're ready? You think you can be Natalie Lambert, county coroner, business as usual?"

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it, Nat. How many times have you lied to our friends to cover for me? Now you have to cover for you, too. Are you ready to face Stonetree, or Grace? What happens next time your sister-in-law asks you out to lunch? Do you have any idea what you'll tell them?" Not giving her a chance to reply, he

continued bluntly, "Are you ready to dissect the boy you killed last night?"

She focused on the floor. "No. No, of course not. But..."

"It's time to disappear, Nat. I'm sorry, but it's the only choice. After tonight, Natalie Lambert and Nick Knight no longer exist."

*

She looked over her shoulder one last time, but all she could see of the city where she had lived her whole life were the lights at the top of the CN Tower.

The Caddy now bore Colorado license plates, green mountains silhouetted against white. She examined the false driver's license Janette had supplied, trying to accustom herself to being Natalie Ryan of Denver. A U.S. citizen--that in itself was pretty weird.

All they could bring with them was in the back seat of the Cadillac; the trunk remained empty in case something went wrong en route and morning caught them without shelter. A few more things--but not much--had been packed in a box for Janette to mail after them. But everything else had been left behind. They had truly vanished, the sort of missing-persons case that never gets solved. Since Nick's car was gone and hers was still there, they would probably think that he had kidnapped her; but he insisted that none of that mattered. They were different people now.

"I hope Sidney's okay," she fretted. "I wish we could have brought him along."

"You and me and a car going missing is one thing," Nick reminded her. "Taking the cat would have been too odd. Besides, he might not be safe around some of the others."

"I know, I know. And Schanke promised that Jenny would take good care of him."

"Yeah." Nick shook his head. "This would have been a whole lot harder to pull off without his help. I think he's a better liar than either of us."

"I think you're right." She looked back again, almost involuntarily; Toronto was now quite out of sight. "It bugs me that Paul didn't show up to give us more trouble."

"I know. It doesn't make sense," Nick agreed. "Unless he decided that by goading you into killing he got what he was after."

"And then some."

Nick glanced over at her, reaching out to take her hand. "No. He wanted to destroy you, and I don't think he succeeded. Do you?"

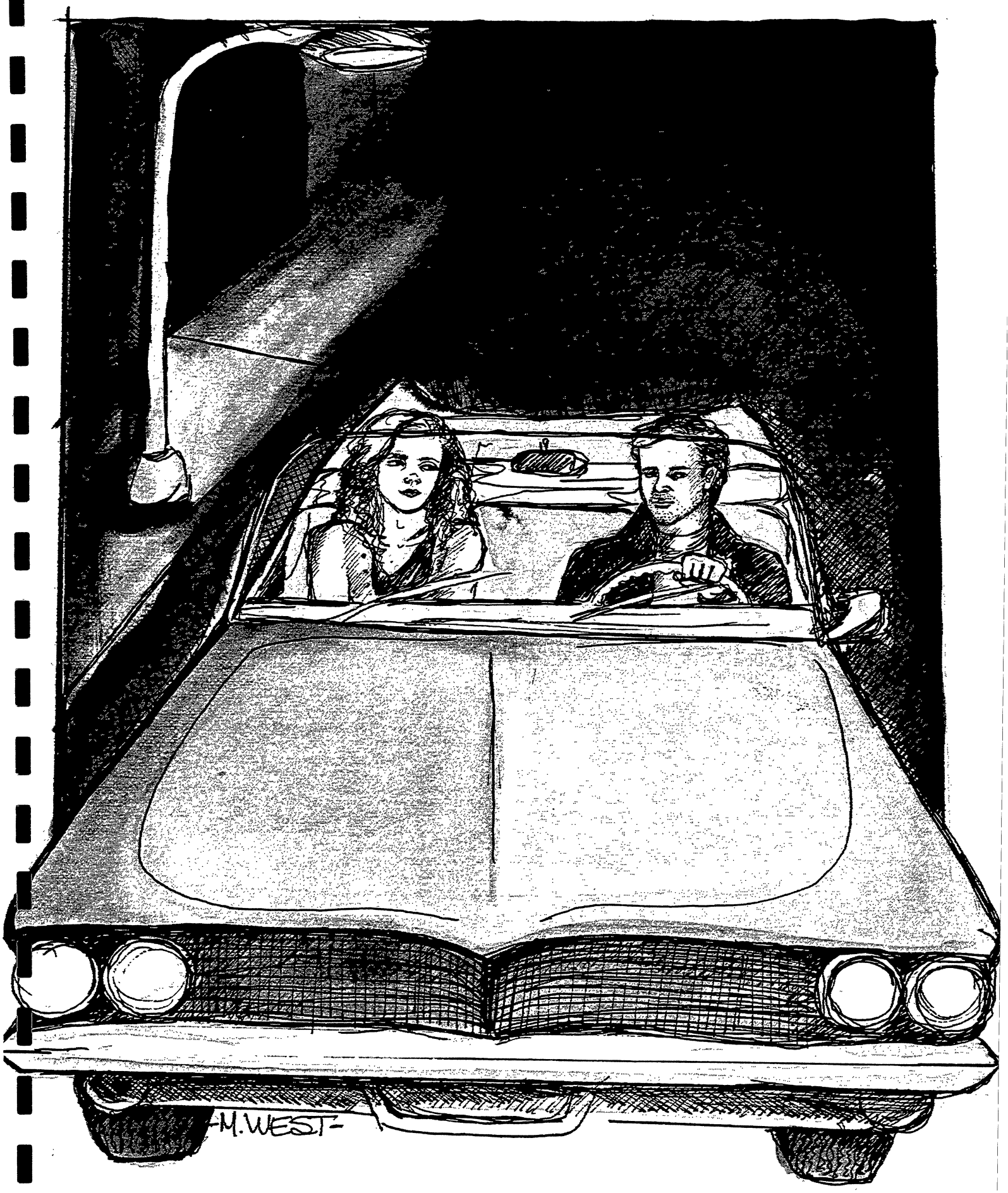
She smiled and squeezed his hand. "No."

"And he never will," Nick concluded positively.

Natalie said nothing, turning her attention back to the road before them, waiting to see where it would lead.

- The End -

[Valerie Meachum has had fan work published in Faded Roses, Turn of the Wheel, and the first issue of Good Guys Wear Fangs, and edits the vampire zine Heartsblood. Other Forever Knight stories are forthcoming, including the sequel to this tale, in future issues of Good Guys Wear Fangs, Heartsblood, and On the Wings of a Knight. She has an even greater passion for the theater than for writing, and can always be found acting, singing, dancing, costume designing, or all of the above, somewhere in the Denver area.]


-M.WEST-

TUG-OF-WAR

Two women
One man
A perfectly balanced struggle
Not for his heart
But for his soul

On one side, Janette
Woman of mystery
Woman of the past
The one who tempted him into
The dark snare of immortality
And who cannot understand
Why he no longer wishes to share it with her

On the other side, Natalie
Woman of science
Woman of today
The one who offers him hope
A way out of that trap
And with it the human friendship and trust
He never expected to have again

Between them, one man
Whom each loves in her own way

But who is he?
Nicholas
The man of the night
Whose kiss holds
The power of death or unending life
Or Nick Knight
The heroic police detective
Who seeks atonement through
The lives he saves?

None of the three is certain
Least of all the Dark Knight himself
Still desiring the temptress
Still placing his faith in the doctor

Each holds her place in his heart, yet
He cannot separate them from
The possibilities they represent

One seeks to draw him into darkness
The other to lead him into the sunlight

He feels that pull
Equal influences
From opposite sides
Just when he thinks he has
Stepped closer to one
The other reaches out to snatch him back

A perfectly balanced struggle
Which means that, in the end,
No matter what they do
His fate remains something
He alone must choose.

-Valerie Lynn Meachum
May 15, 1992

STARSKY AND HUTCH was a cop show that ran from 1975 to 1979. While it did have its fair share of "shoot 'em ups" and car chases (complete with Starsky's distinctive red and white-striped Torino), the lasting draw of the show has been the relationship between the two partners.

David Michael Starsky was originally from New York City. The son of a cop, he moved to Los Angeles as a child to live with an aunt and uncle after his father was shot down. Street-wise and cocky, Starsky acted on impulse and instinct. Just under six feet tall, he had dark blue eyes and a dark curly mop of hair that seemed to accent his energetic approach to life.

From Minnesota, little is know about Kenneth Hutchinson's family life except that he was once divorced sometime before the series began. Tall and blond with ice-blue eyes, Hutch appeared outgoing, but was beset by overworked introspection. There was some college in his background and some money, but how much of either was never mentioned.

If Starsky was more inclined to jump into situations where angels fear to tread, Hutch was just as likely to "think an idea to death," whether it meant an undercover scenario or his own personal relationships. But despite their different approaches to life, they usually arrived at the same solution to a problem, regardless of its nature.

Always ready to move in each other's defense, there was an emotional closeness between them that few of their collective women understood. And there were a lot of women. There was also a physical closeness in the series that included touches, pats, and hugs; their personal space seemed to include each other. It is surprising to watch whether in the 70's "macho" era or now.

One of the most notable episodes was the last. In "Sweet Revenge," Starsky was ambushed in the police garage, and teetered between life and death for most of the story. Hutch, in the meantime, almost single-handedly brings in Gunther, the head of the crime organization responsible. It is not only a case of watching Starsky suffer; you also watch Hutch unravel until it is a question of who will live longer: the victim or his avenging partner. They both survive, of course. But this one episode is a prime example of that peculiar S&H intimacy.

The nicknames, Blintz and Dirtball, are found in the series. For instance, Starsky came up with the Blond Blintz as a CB name for Hutch when they were undercover as truckers. His own self-proclaimed "handle" was Puce Goose. Perhaps we should be grateful that while the Blintz did resurface in later episodes, the Puce Goose was not heard of again.

LESSONS

by

B.N. Fish

[1992]

Hutch and me met Nick Knight on a case. He seemed likable enough, but hardly extraordinary. Okay, he did seem to have pretty good hearing and could get around in the dark. But that didn't make him that unusual. Yeah, we kidded around about how he'd make a great bat and what-all. But who was serious? My main concern was that he had saved Hutch's life.

That was enough.

Then, a few months later, Hutch got himself in the soup again, this time by way of some weird assault that left him unconscious on my doorstep and minus a pint of blood. And who should turn up, but our young Det. Knight. He had some wild story about how my partner had been attacked by a vampire. I was ready to toss him out on his ear. But Hutch agreed with him, not that the Blintz was in the best shape.

I had to be convinced the hard way. Nick took me on a little flying trip, and then I actually saw for myself the woman that had hurt my partner.

Miranda was a vampire. There was blood, fangs and the whole bit.

Nick and me got Hutch away, but not before she got to munching on him one more time. Left with the possibility of becoming a Renfield-like slave or a vampire, we chose the latter with something less than enthusiasm.

When it was over, Nick told me to just hold Hutch while he slept. I could handle that. But I couldn't help but wonder how my partner was going to take the "morning after the night before."

We slept.

* * *

"He'll wake up soon," said Nick.

"Good," I nodded, as I looked down at the Hutchinson resting on my shoulder. "I just hope I don't have to explain the sleepin' arrangements."

Standing at the foot of the bed, Nick was unconcerned.

"He needed you," he shrugged.

"Yeah."

After all, it wasn't every day that someone became a vampire, was it? And this would be Hutch's first day, er, night, as one of the "undead". Compared to that, two partners sleeping together didn't count for much, did it?

Blond fringed eyes fluttered open.

"Hiya, Blintz. It's about time you opened those baby blues," I grinned into bleary pale eyes. "I was beginnin' to think I was gonna have to wake you with a kiss."

Hutch frowned. "Not unless you shave first."

He started to nestle back into his pillow which just happened to be me.

Puzzlement crossed his features. I could read the *what's-going-on-here?* in his face. I was ready to let go with a *I-don't-need-no-freeloaders-in-my-apartment, especially-when-they-got-a-perfectly-good-one-of-their-own.*

But then he saw the blood on my shirt.

"Starsk?"

"Hey, it's okay," I said hurriedly. "It's not my blood. Or yours."

That cleft between his eyebrows deepened.

Another voice spoke up, "How do you feel, Hutch?"

I don't think my partner realized at first that someone else had asked the question.

"Dunno," he mumbled, as he touched the brown stains. "Funny. Sick kinda."

"Sick how?" the third person asked.

I watched it dawn on Hutch that we weren't alone. He twisted in my arms. I was hoping that seeing Nick standing there would remind my partner of all that had happened the night before.

But it wasn't to be.

Light blue eyes grew big as saucers, as they centered on the slim young man.

"Hutch?" I asked, as I became aware of tremors along his body.

His mouth moved but no words came out. Then his eyes began to roll up.

"Come on, partner," I tried to soothe. "We're okay."

Nick moved, pushing the blond back on the bed.

"What're you...?"

But my protest died, as I watched Hutch go into convulsions.

"Get the wine bottle in your refrigerator," Nick said, as he whipped out his belt.

I ran.

It wasn't until I reached the kitchen that I remembered.

I didn't have any such bottle.

But when I opened the short white door, there it was. I grabbed it and hurried back.

Nick straddled my partner, who arched violently on the mattress. The belt leather was looped around Hutch's jaw, forcing it open with one hand. With the other Nick tried to anchor an arm. But the Blintz was clawing at Knight's side with his free hand.

I made a grab for those flaying nails, but--

"Bottle," Nick said, between clenched teeth.

"Right here," I said, holding it out to him.

"Pour a little in his mouth."

"He'll choke," I protested.

"A very little. Hurry."

So, I pulled the cork, and tipped it toward Hutch's frothing lips.

I nearly dropped the thing when I finally realized what I was trying to put into my partner's mouth.

I mean, I knew he was a vampire.

But the reality of it didn't sink in until I saw the blood trickle over the strap holding his tongue down and into his throat.

Hutch was a vampire.

"Rub his neck," Nick told me. "Make him swallow it."

I did it. But it wasn't easy for any of us.

"Do it again, and then talk to him, Starsky. Let him know you're here."

O-kay. But just what was I supposed to say?

"...Uh, come on, ya Blintz. What're ya doin' now? Ain't it bad enough you sleep forever? An' on my arm, too. My bicep feels like an accordion. It'd serve you right, if I played it for you at all hours of the day...er, night."

Hutch still thrashed.

I glanced at Knight.

He only nodded.

All well and good here, but how about a few ideas?

"Now you're tryin' to breakdance all over the bed. An' on my bed, too. How

come you never do this at your place? Beds ain't for dancin' anyway."

Slowly he became quiet but very rigid.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you nothin'? I can see it now. Mrs. Hutchinson givin' lessons to you an' your buddies an' her sayin'...."

"Starsky, shut up."

I had been so engrossed with spinning my tale of nonsense, that I didn't see Hutch's body relax. Right now he was glaring at me with one open eye.

I grinned.

I was about to give him a hug, when I saw him use both eyes to study me.

"Don't you dare," my partner ordered. "You still haven't shaved."

"That makes us even. You haven't either," I shot back. "You feelin' okay now?"

Hutch sighed, "I don't know."

"What happened?" I demanded, only to find Nick just returning from the other room, carrying a cup.

He poured some of the bottle in it, and gave it to my partner.

"Drink this," he said.

Hutch eyed it skeptically. He curled his lip with distaste.

"It's too late now," said Knight. "You're committed to this life."

"I thought I had maybe dreamed it," said my partner softly.

"I'm afraid not. It's as real as the blood and what just happened."

"What *did* just happen?" I tried again.

Knight rubbed his chest where Hutch had raked him.

"Shock," he said. "It happens sometimes. This time was probably because Miranda initiated you, but I brought you across."

"You didn't tell us about that," my partner said.

"You didn't have enough things to worry about? Why don't you two get cleaned up? We're not quite done yet."

Nick glanced toward the front door.

The vampires were outside, the ones who had come after Hutch when Miranda had made him ripe for the picking.

How about that? My partner, the blond tomato. The unstriped variety, of course.

"...They're still out there?" I asked.

"Can you tell, Hutch?" Nick asked.

The Blintz frowned and then stared at the far wall.

"I...don't...know. Does one of them have a cold?"

"Sounds like it, doesn't it?" Nick smiled.

"You mean, you can still get sick?" I asked surprised.

How can you be immortal, if you've got a runny nose?

"Disease is more of an inconvenience than anything," Knight said.

"But a cold, for Pete's sake," I grumbled.

"I think in this case, the sniffling is due more to drugs."

"Oh, great," Hutch muttered, "a vampire junkie. That's all we need."

"This is more like a vassal, or servant, with a habit," Nick shrugged. "Don't worry about it. We still have to go through the door. And before that, you..." He looked at Hutch. "...Have to drink *that*." Knight indicated the cup.

"I was hoping to ignore it."

"I'm afraid it doesn't ignore very well. And considering this is your first feeding, you need it even more. It will help settle your stomach...and your head."

Hutch frowned.

"You feelin' that bad?" I demanded.

My partner shrugged.

Terrific. There's nothing more frustrating than a stoic Hutchinson.

"So, drink it already," I urged.

"But once I do, I'll be stuck with it," my partner said quietly.

"You're stuck with it now," said Knight. "The longer you wait, the worse you'll feel. The worse you feel, the less control you have. Without control,

people die. That includes anyone in this room...or out of it."

Hutch looked at me.

"Come on, Blintz. Down the hatch. A vampire partner is better'n a homicidal one, especially when I'm the first item on the menu," I teased.

Still he hesitated.

"Think of yourself as an immortal, rather than a vampire," said Nick. "I never heard the word 'vampire' until Bram Stoker's book came out."

Hutch sighed, "...What kind is it?"

Kind?

"Beef," Knight explained. "Jack brought it."

Cautiously, my partner brought the cup to his lips.

Not that I could blame him. The idea was revolting. Maybe the old Mosaic laws had more of a hold on me than I thought. But this was his life we were talking about.

Hutch looked at me.

I nodded, trying to look more sure about it than I felt.

He took a sip.

He looked almost surprised.

And then Hutch gulped down the rest of it. When he was done, he almost seemed reluctant to give the cup back to Nick.

Knight smiled.

"You two get cleaned up," he suggested. "I'll be in the kitchen."

He left the room.

"Yeah," I said.

It occurred to me that neither one of us had even looked at soap and water in close to forty-eight hours. If I could tell by just looking, what was my fastidious partner feeling? His new heightened senses must be driving him bats.

Did I really say that?

Fortunately, not aloud.

"Let's go, buddy. You wash my back an' I'll wash yours."

Hutch just stood there, looking kind of lost.

"You okay?" I asked.

"How should I know?" he snapped.

He grumped off to the bathroom.

I sighed.

So, it was going to be like that, was it?

A grouchy vampire didn't sound like anything any sane person would want to fool with. But I'm a grand master at dealing with grouchy Hutches. And since he'd been a Hutch long before he'd taken up drinking blood for a living, I didn't see any reason to change tactics now.

Besides, who said I was sane?

In the bathroom, I found him staring at himself in the mirror.

"Find somethin' new in there?" I asked.

"No horns or fangs, anyway," he sighed, as he got ready to shave.

"It's a good thing. It'd probably be hard to get a haircut."

He glared at me.

"Come on, Blintz. Get out of those skivvies and scrub your dirty vampire hide."

"My hide? Shall I tell you what you smell like?"

"No, thanks. I already got a whiff of myself, an' that was plenty."

"You don't know the half of it," he grumbled, as he finished shaving.

"So, tell me."

But Hutch ignored me, as he turned on the shower. He stripped down and stepped in the tub.

He gasped.

I grinned, as I shaved.

It would serve him right, if he froze his wha-too-sees off. Except...steam was billowing out over the curtain.

"Hutch?"

Nothing.

I deliberated whether I should take a peek or not. If he caught me, he would yell. He would yell in spades, something about me violating the sanctity of his shower, probably. Of course, it *would* exercise his heart rate.

Besides, he was being too quiet in there.

I looked.

He was washing all right. But he was moving that soap faster than I'd ever seen any human being move it before. Not that I've made a study of such things, you understand. I would have beat a discreet retreat to the dry side of the curtain, if I hadn't caught sight of his face.

Grim determination showed there. His eyes were closed tight. The nerve in his jaw was jumping from the pressure. He turned off the water with a jerk.

I hoped I'd be able to turn it on again.

"Hutch?" I called softly, as I grabbed a towel.

He just stood there, shivering and dripping. I wrapped him up and pulled him out of the tub.

"Sit," I instructed, as I started patting him down with another towel.

He obeyed without protest. A bad sign in itself.

Nick's voice came through the door, "Are you all right in there?"

I made my partner look at me. He shook his head.

"We're gettin' there," I called out.

"Okay. Yell, if you need me."

Frowning, I toweled Hutch dry. He started to help about the time I was almost finished.

"You okay?" I asked.

He nodded.

"You want to go out there?" I asked. "Or you gonna wait for me?"

"I'll wait."

"You sure?"

"Starsky, get in the shower. You smell like the bottom of a garbage can."

"Subtlety will get you nowheres," I said with dignity.

I peeled off my clothes and did my own race with soap and water.

Hutch couldn't be feeling too bad, if he was insulting me.

Right?

Maybe.

Dried off, and the towel wrapped firmly around my waist, I knelt down by my too-silent partner.

"What is it, Hutch?" I asked softly.

"...I liked it."

Now what was he talking about? Liked what?

"What do you mean?"

The handsome face closed itself off, as he shut his eyes.

"Talk to me, partner," I almost pleaded. "There ain't nothin' you can't tell me. That hasn't changed. An' it ain't gonna, unless you change it."

"...The blood, Starsky. I liked the taste of blood."

The self-disgust in his voice was more than obvious.

Okay. Let's try the nonchalant approach.

"That's a good thing, ain't it? 'Specially since you're gonna be drinkin' it for the next millennium?"

Hutch shook his head in despair.

"Look, partner," I said, briskly, "you're alive and you're gonna stay that way, if I have to pour the stuff down your throat myself."

"But what... What if I get to liking it too much?"

"Nah," I shrugged. "Who ever heard of a fat vampire? Let's go. I got lots of questions yet... Although I guess he can probably hear us from out there."

"He can. He's moving around the living room."

"He is? You're going to be a whiz when it come to a stake-out. Come on,

Blintz, let's get some clothes on. I'm freezin' an' a vampire in a towel ain't dignified."

"Look who's talking, Dirtball."

"Move it!" I thundered, as I shooed him out of the bathroom.

The bedroom was empty. We scrambled for clothes. My partner had to scramble more than me, because he had used some of the spare clothes he had at my apartment the night before.

Fully dressed and neat once more, we both seemed to hesitate by the closed bedroom door.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"By the front window. ...It feels strange, Starsk."

"Strange nothin'. It's great. You're gonna be our secret weapon."

I grinned, as we went out into the living room.

Nick was standing by the window. He kept his back to us.

Trying to give us an illusion of privacy?

A glance at my partner revealed someone content to wait.

I wasn't.

"You might have warned us about the water," I said loudly.

"I would have, if I had known," our senior vampire said, turning.

"You mean, you don't do that?" I asked.

"I mean, I didn't know it wasn't unique to me. I come from an age when people didn't bathe regularly, much less the entire body. I used to wash my face and hands maybe once a day and that only at LaCroix's insistence. This fascination with cleanliness is something almost unique to this country, and then only in the last fifty or sixty years or so."

This country?

Hutch beat me to it.

"Just where are you from? Originally?" my partner asked.

Nick smiled.

"Orleans," giving it that funny pronunciation as only the French can.

"You crossed the ocean," I said.

"It can be done. I'm not saying I enjoyed it much. But I may just be a terrible sailor. LaCroix managed. And Janette."

"Janette?"

"She was my first fledgling."

"You mean like me?" Hutch asked.

"Pretty much. Except I took her blood as well."

"How many have you done? Brought across, I mean?" my partner asked.

"You make three."

"Three?" I sputtered. "In over a hundred and fifty years? What's the matter? You don't believe in indiscriminate promiscuity, or somethin'?"

"Especially not the indiscriminate kind," Nick smiled.

Hey. What about...?

"...Starsky wants to know about the sex," said Hutch.

Who needed to be a vampire to be able to read minds? Here I had vampire and partner in one, big, blond package.

Lucky me.

"And you don't?" I accused.

Hutch shrugged.

"You're right," said Nick. "Survival should have a certain priority. But I guess I should have told you, warned you. I am impotent."

If he was, that meant Hutch....

No!

"But," Knight broke into my thoughts, "that doesn't mean you can't enjoy sex."

"Huh?"

"Your ability to make love just takes other forms. And they're every bit as enjoyable. You won't even necessarily miss the other."

"Did you?" Hutch asked.
"I was aware of the difference. But that's about all. I can still...please a woman."
"But don't you feel...," I stammered.
"What you feel about yourself comes from yourself. It's one of the many things LaCroix taught me. And he was the most sexually charged being I've ever known."
"Yeah, well, he was French," I muttered.
"He was Russian."
"With a name like LaCroix?"
"Nobody said it was the name he was born with, Starsky," said Hutch.
Oh.
"At any rate," said Nick, "just remember passion and erectability are not synonymous terms."
"Erecta-what?" I asked.
My partner answered, "The ability to have a...whatever."
"A 'whatever'?" I grinned. "What 'whatever'?"
Hutch glared at me.
"Come on, Blintz, explain it to me," I teased.
"Knock it off, Starsky."
"Knock what off?" I asked, straining the innocent act to the limit. "I just asked a simple question. ...So, how come you're not blushin'?" Then I turned to Nick. "He always blushes."
"He can't," Nick explained. "The same reason he can't 'whatever' is why he can't blush. There's not as much blood."
"How come?"
"The body changes," our senior vampire said simply.
Oh, does it really?
Nick went on, "Jack is always complaining about a lack of documentation on vampires. It has to be admitted that most of the People aren't interested in how or why we function, only that we do."
"Isn't that a little short-sighted?" Hutch asked.
Listen to him. Mr. Let's-examine-this-thing-and-see-how-it-works. Well, he was going to have plenty of time to play with it. I was going to make sure of it.
"Not short-sighted so much, as a lack of curiosity," said Nick. "Or maybe just too much self-absorption. We are a very self-centered bunch."
"You, too?" I asked.
"I'm hardly immune. ...If anyone could have told you the whys and wherefores, it would have been LaCroix."
"And LaCroix's dead," Hutch sighed.
"And LaCroix's dead," Knight agreed. "But Jack's trying. It'll help him to have two of us to study now, instead of just me."
"I can hardly wait," my partner groaned.
"Oh, it's not so bad. Your tolerance for pain is pretty extensive now. And blood loss. Of course, there is a limit."
"You can die?" I blurted out. "From blood loss, I mean."
"Yes. The conditions have to be right, if you can call it that. The wounds have to be massive and numerous. The body usually reacts quickly and just closes up."
What a cheery subject.
Shall we discuss vivisection next?
"What about gunshot?"
What?
It was Hutch.
Why was he asking about...?
"No, not usually," Nick shook his head.
"Three. In the chest," my partner said tersely. "One of them near the heart."

Oh. That.

My poor Blintz. Would he ever stop remembering gunshots in the police garage?

Maybe about the time I did.

"No."

It was so short an answer I almost missed it.

"No?" I asked.

"No."

I aimed a "see-there" glance at my partner.

"A bomb in your lap might do it."

"Might?" Hutch asked.

"Like I said, there hasn't been much in the way of scientific studies on the subject."

I jumped in. "You just make sure you stay away from any bombs," I told Hutch.

"You do the same," he glared at me.

We bristled at each other a few moments.

"What about...," my partner began, breaking away from my stare.

How about that? I won one. The Blintz usually...

"...Decapitation," Hutch finished.

Oh great.

This was winning?

"Definitely," Nick was saying. "Decapitation, fire, exposure to the sun, a wooden stake through the heart. Any kind of wood will cause more damage, and more pain, than any metal. There are supposed to be certain woods that are more...effective than others. But my limited experience of such things pretty well killed any curiosity I might have had about the subject."

"You've been staked?" I asked, in spite of myself.

Okay. So, I spite myself a lot.

"After a fashion," Nick shrugged. "Again, it's nothing I'd recommend."

"But you obviously survived it," Hutch commented.

"I've been lucky. I blundered into several dangerous situations. I was told a lot depends on the individual involved. I'm more inclined to believe it depends on the help you can get."

"Which in your case," I said, "would have been LaCroix."

Knight nodded, "I would have been dead several times over if not for him. My best advice is to avoid those situations altogether."

Sounds good to me.

"I promise if I see anyone come near me with a wooden stake, I'll go the other direction," Hutch swore with mock seriousness.

"You see that you do just that," I snapped.

"You better watch it, Starsky," my partner teased, "or I might just take a bite out of you."

Talk fast before he can think about what he just said.

"Ha! You bite me an' I'll give you a headache like you ain't never seen. I like garlic, remember?"

Okay. So, it's not the best comeback in the world. But I was in a hurry.

It did the trick.

"What about garlic?" the Blintz asked Nick.

Diverted as intended.

"I don't like it," Knight smiled. "But I'm not so sure it's a case of reaction, rather than aversion."

"Huh?"

Yeah, that was me. Articulate as ever.

"Your senses are more acute now. They get even more so as you get older. That's all of your senses, and for good or ill, that includes smell."

"And since garlic is so potent anyway," Hutch continued thoughtfully, "it's that much more aromatic now?"

"You got it."

See what a college education can do for you?

"Okay," my partner said to me. "You're safe."

"You just remember that," I grinned.

"You're too skinny, anyway."

"Skinny? I'll have you know I'm trim."

"Trim as what? A traffic light?"

"Who you callin' a...?"

"As much as I hate to interrupt," Nick broke in.

He didn't look very worried.

"Could you two carry on this scintillating conversation over breakfast? You both need to eat."

"Hey, that's right," I bounced toward the kitchen. "I'm starved."

"But I have...eaten," Hutch protested.

"Not enough."

I watched them from my open refrigerator. Nick lifted his hand.

"May I?" he asked, moving closer to Hutch.

"What?" my partner asked warily.

"Your throat," the other said softly, touching his fingertips to Hutch's jugular vein. "...Not near enough. Especially for your first feeding. ...You're not feeling well, are you?"

Nick dropped his hand and stepped away.

"Well," Hutch shrugged, "it's not as bad as it was."

I went and got the brown bottle that was not wine out of the bedroom. I plopped it on the kitchen table in front of my obstinate partner.

"Drink!" I ordered.

"Starsky," Hutch grumbled.

I looked at Nick.

"He needs it. Right?" I asked.

"He needs it."

"That settles it," I said, pulling out the cork and shoving the bottle at his chest. "Either you drink it or I feed it to you...intraveneously, if necessary."

"Is that supposed to worry me?" Hutch said, with maddening disdain.

"It better. There's two of us here. He's got the muscle. I got the charm."

"Charm? You've got all the charm of a bulldozer."

"Good," I crowed. "That means you can't resist me, can ya?" I was serious now. "I mean it, Hutch. Drink it. I ain't gonna see you die now, after goin' through all this."

My partner sighed.

I had him.

Hutch looked at Nick. But our vampire leader was busy examining one of my spindly kitchen chairs.

Nick was leaving it to me to handle my neurotic partner. That's okay. I had plenty of practice.

Hutch drank.

"...What about you?" he asked Nick.

"It's okay. I had some," the other said quietly. "You need it more."

It only then occurred to me that Knight required blood to live, too.

I was the only human in the room.

No.

There was me and Hutch. And a vampire.

I frowned.

No. Make that me and Hutch. And Nick.

"Drink it all," Knight directed.

To my mild surprise, the Blintz didn't argue this time. He just up-ended the contents of the bottle down his throat.

So much for Hutchinson etiquette.

"How ya doin'?" I mumbled around the stale doughnut in my mouth.

"Better."

"Better?" I questioned between bites. "How about 'good'?"

"Better," Hutch insisted.

"You need more?" I asked, as I tackled some Froot Loops and a leftover slice of pizza.

Hey, I was hungry.

"He needs more," Nick confirmed. "He needs a living source."

"A what?" I sputtered.

"A human being, Starsky," my partner said bitterly. "You volunteering?"

Aw, Hutch...

But it was Nick who took up the argument this time.

"I suppose we could find a derelict somewhere," he said. "But I was thinking more along the lines of a stockyard."

"A stockyard?!"

"Why can't I just...?" Hutch asked, pointing to the now-empty bottle on the table.

"Oh, you can exist on packaged blood," Knight admitted. "I've done it. But it's something like living on junk food. That can be done, too. But there comes a time when you need more. Your first feeding is one of those times."

"But I've just...," my partner protested.

Let's face it, Hutch would argue at his own execution. And that just might be what he was doing now.

"You've just," Nick argued right back, "taken the edge off. You have to have a large quantity of blood that initial meal. And while you stand here debating the point, you put yourself at risk. And everyone else."

Knight looked at me.

"Hey, now wait a minute," I denied. "Hutch would never..."

"Under normal circumstances," he broke in, "no. And later on, no, I can't see him ever hurting you, no matter what the provocation. But this first feeding isn't normal. If Hutch doesn't get more blood, he won't last the night. But before that can happen, instinct will kick in, the instinct to survive. A Kodiak bear with rabies is nothing compared to a vampire in bloodlust. Believe me, it's no memory you ever want to have. ...Either one of you."

He turned away.

I looked at my partner.

Hutch nodded.

We agreed. Nick had either seen such a thing. Or done it.

I didn't want to know which, just now.

"Hard to argue with," I muttered under my breath. "Ain't he?"

"I'm with you," my partner whispered.

I could barely hear him. But the point was that he had heard me. No problem really. But it was going to take a little getting used to.

"So, shall we go?" Knight said, pointing to the front door.

Hutch took a deep breath.

"Let's do it then," he said.

"Just how do we do it?" I asked.

"Me first," said our leader. "Then Hutch. Then you. And once we're out there, you stay between us."

When he said "you," he meant me.

"Hey, I thought we were protectin' Hutch here," I objected.

"We are. But we're," he pointed to himself and my partner, "also protecting you."

Har-rumph.

"Then what?" Hutch asked.

"We wait to see what they're going to do. Then we either fly, or drive, to a cattle pen."

"Fly?" the Blintz asked bewildered.

"Yeah, sure," I said, with confidence. I knew about this part from first-hand experience. "He flies," I announced.

"And so can you," Nick said to my partner.

"You mean like a bat?" Hutch asked.

"No. No bat. No wolf. Not even a mist under the door. I always thought that last would be very handy."

"But you can fly?"

My partner sounded a bit skeptical.

"Trust me," I put in. "He can." Then I turned to Nick. "I think we'd better drive. He's not ready. And neither am I."

"Good enough. It is something you should learn how to do sometime. But for right now..."

The young-looking cop closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Confidence. A trick of the mind. They'll know if you're afraid or have doubts."

"Just like psychin' out the bad guys," I grinned.

We could handle it. We did this kind of thing all the time.

"Just remember these 'bad guys' can do more than just pick up on vibes," said Nick.

"They can read minds?" Hutch demanded.

"Some of them," Knight shrugged. "So...either you come on like the meanest S.O.Somethings in the whole valley. Or...."

"Or?"

"Or you simply convey that you just want to be left alone. But you'll defend you and yours with everything you have."

"I think we can manage that," I nodded.

"That's your strength," Nick said. "Use it."

He put his hand on the doorknob.

"What about you?" Hutch asked.

Knight shrugged. "I'm a bonus. I'll help where I can. But your main defense will always be you."

He started to turn the handle.

"But they can't be happy," Hutch said, "that you interfered with Miranda."

"If they were that angry, they wouldn't be waiting out there now."

They'd be in here, doing their vampire stuff.

I understood.

My partner agreed.

"What they are mostly," Nick went on, "is irritated. I've deprived them of a tasty morsel. Possibly two morsels."

Two?

Me?!

"But we're going to argue the point. That's part of our advantage. Most vampires would rather have an unsuspecting mortal for a snack, rather than have to fight for their supper. But you know what's out there. You'll protect each other's back."

"Speaking of protection," Hutch said, "our guns aren't much good here, are they?"

"Not really."

"Where's your broom, Starsky?"

"Broom?"

"Come on, buddy. I've been trying for years to convince everyone that you're smarter than you look. You're not helping any."

I glared. "...Over there."

I pointed to the gap between the refrigerator and the wall. My partner pulled out the broom and then proceeded to break off the sweeping part.

"Hey," I complained.

But then I saw the reasoning, when he shoved the broken pole into my hand.

"There's only one," I said.

Hutch waved the fact aside. He spoke to Nick.

"Would he be safer, if he just stayed in here?"

Now, wait just a...

"No."

There went my argument. Killed before I even got going on it.

"There's nothing really to stop them from coming in here now," Nick continued. "With us gone...?"

"...A sitting duck," my partner muttered.

I fought the urge to quack.

"Now? Gentlemen?" Nick asked, at the door once more.

Hutch and me looked at each other.

"Now," we said together.

Nick stepped outside and to the left. My partner cut in front of me and to the right. That left about a three foot hole in the middle for me. It was like being the Canadian bacon on an Egg McMuffin.

I pulled the door shut behind me. This particular Canadian bacon didn't intend to get bit from behind.

We waited.

I couldn't see or hear anyone.

But I could feel them. Unfriendly eyes were examining us, *very* unfriendly eyes.

What now?

Nick went down a step and stood still.

"Keep between us," he said to me, softly.

I wasn't going nowheres without them, both of them, that's for sure.

Our leader went down another step. I plunked down two. Then I felt Hutch move in behind me.

"Can you hear them, Starsky?" my partner whispered.

"No. But I know they're there. What do they sound like?" I asked, as an afterthought.

I could imagine fangs and foaming mouths.

"They breathe funny. Like..."

I felt his attention being drawn to his right.

"Hutch?" Knight called quietly.

"Got it," my partner said firmly.

Fine for him to say.

"What have you got?" I hissed. "And how many?"

"They're moving. And there's...three of them?"

"Make it four," said Nick. "...One and three."

"One and three what?" Hutch asked, over my head.

"One vampire and three vassals. I've got five over here, two and three."

"Great. Nine of 'em," I muttered.

I rolled the broom handle between my palms. As weapons went, it looked pretty pathetic.

"What if they have guns?" I asked.

"Usually they don't," Nick answered distractedly.

"Usually? What about...?"

"Guard his back," our leader cut in, as he reached out in front of us and seemed to snatch something out of the air.

That something turned out to be a man, clawing at Nick's hand, a hand that was wrapped around the other's throat.

I had seen the altered face before, when the woman, Miranda, had tried to kill Hutch. But I still wasn't accustomed to the accented skull and protruding fangs.

"Be still," Knight ordered harshly. "Or I will break it."

Long fingers gouged at an extended neck. Blood showed at the finger tips.

The vampire grew still.

Smart fella.

Now if he would just cover his head with a paper bag, I could be...

"Behind you," came the warning.

I whirled.

How was I supposed to guard Hutch's back, when I was standing in front of him?

As it was, my partner had turned his back to me. But Hutch, who had been known to take on any number of bad guys, single-handedly, was staring up at a swooping maniac in stunned amazement.

Okay, so I wasn't exactly an old hand at the vampire business, myself. But at least, I had seen a flying goblin before.

Once.

Which was one more time than Hutch had.

"Come on, Blintz!" I yelled at him, as I reached past with my trusty broom handle. "Move them blond buns!"

While I was trying to skewer the flying banshee, I missed the ground troops moving up on the right. I saw them out of the corner of my eye, while Hutch jerked something away that was coming after me.

So much for guarding *his* back.

"Hold him, Starsky," came Nick's voice.

I found myself staring at the squirming specter at the end of my "weapon". It was obviously hurting and very much alive. My make-shift lance had pinned the vampire through the guts. Too low to be permanent. I leaned into the pole.

"Now what?" Hutch asked.

I looked to see our two surface attackers moving off. Both were limping. One was holding his arm. They were backing away.

Never mess with a mad Blintz.

As I grinned, I noticed the even facial features.

These were the servants, maybe?

"Nick?" my partner called.

I turned my head.

Our personal vampire had turned his captive around. Nick was holding him by the scruff of his neck, or was it just hair? No, the grip was too solid not to be on muscle and bone.

"Do you want to call it off?" Knight asked.

The other spat.

"What a waste of body fluids, especially when we don't have that much," Nick said calmly. "Call your people."

"Why should I?" the other snarled.

People shouldn't snarl. It's not that effective and it just tends to remind the rest of us how close we are to animals. It also kills whatever merciful tendencies the "snarl-ees" might have.

Evidently, Nick felt pretty much the same.

"Because if you don't, I'll kill you now," he said quietly.

"You killed *her*."

Who? Miranda, the vampire that had started all this.

"Yes, I did. Do you want that kind of death?"

"You can't..."

"But I can. I've done it before. If I have to, I will again."

"You traitorous, damned...."

"That's enough," Nick cut in.

Our leader looked over at my pinned butterfly.

"What about you?" he asked.

"What do you want?" Madame Butterfly asked, laying very still.

"To be left alone."

"But you murdered..."

"The lady is dead. She wanted... Hutch!"

I looked to find Hutch facing another flyer. This time there was no hesitation.

Quick study, my Blintz.

Hutch grabbed the foot that was aimed for my head and yanked. Bones cracked as my partner threw the vampire to the ground and somehow managed to step on his

neck. He, it(?) didn't squirm...much.

Not too bad.

"As I was saying," Nick continued, "the lady is dead. She wanted these two. I took them back. How many more do you want to die?"

"There will be others."

"There's always 'others'. Right now, there's only you."

I couldn't tell if Butterfly was buying it or not. I didn't get a chance to find out what he was going to say.

The remaining four appeared out of nowhere. "Nowhere" being all the directions I wasn't looking in at the time.

I couldn't do much because of ol' Butterfly. And of course, when the attack came, our captives started to struggle. I was busy balancing on my vampire-sticker. Hutch had his foot occupied, but both hands were free. So he punched out one on his side.

What about Nick?

By the time I looked at him, I found a body at his feet.

And what was Knight using as a weapon?

It was the vampire he had a backsided strangle-hold on. Somehow he was swinging the body like a quarterstaff/battering ram. Don't ask me how, but he was lifting that whozits as easy as I had my broom handle.

It was not as quiet however.

Screams and swearing were everywhere, everywhere around Nick, that is.

Then there was silence.

The body count amounted to six on the ground. That included the two Hutch and me were sitting, uh, leaning on. There was the one that Nick was still holding upright, pretty much. That left two standing on their own power, even though they didn't look too happy about it, the standing, or their situation.

"All right then," said Knight calmly. "We're going to go back up to the head of the stairs. Starsky and Hutch will leave their two. But I'm going to take this one with me."

"Uh, Nick," I asked, as softly as I could. "You sure about this?"

He looked at me and said simply, "No."

Great.

We could follow his lead and hope he was right. Or? We could try to fight it out on our own. And one never "just kills" a vampire.

Peachy.

And a few other expletives not fit for mixed company.

I looked at Hutch. He gave me the most infinitesimal of nods.

Stay with Nick, it said.

What kind of choice did we have?

I shrugged.

Our leader dragged his captive up to stand level with me and mine. I shuffled ready to move up next to my partner.

"Take the stick with you," Knight said.

Yeah, I might need it again.

As soon as I un-speared my prisoner, I saw Nick lash out with his foot and kick the vampire down the stairs. Any thought of a helpless victim died when Butterfly stood up immediately and hissed up at us.

Hissing should be in the same category as snarling.

So much for sympathy.

"Okay, Hutch," Nick said then. "Your turn."

My partner cautiously removed his size thirty-eight boots. Again the merciless foot shot out and the body joined the others below.

But this time the vampire didn't move.

"He's not dead, Hutch," Knight said, without turning.

How did he know what my partner was probably thinking? I wasn't used to anyone else picking up on the Blintz's wavelength.

"Blood link, Starsky," the young man said softly.

By now we were all crowded at my front door. Nick's prisoner was one step down, still in our leader's grip.

"So, what do you want to do?" Nick called down to our audience. "We can either go through this all again, only this time make a real effort to kill. Or we can just all go home and forget it."

"You killed...," Butterfly began.

"If you were that concerned about her, why weren't any of you with her when she tried to take Hutchinson?"

Good question.

Any answers out there?

After a few long moments, the others began to move away from us. Only Butterfly held his ground.

"I'll remember you," he said to Nick.

Nick only nodded, as he gave his captive a push.

Then they were gone. Every one of them.

"Is that it?" I asked, as I looked again at the empty street and sky around us.

Nick held up a hand for silence. He scanned the scenery, as he went down the stairs once more.

It was so quiet.

"Hutch?" I whispered.

"I..." He frowned. "I don't know, Starsky."

"You okay?"

"...Don't know that either."

I studied his pale face.

He looked terrible.

"...Ya hungry?"

Hutch sighed, "I wish I knew."

"There's still one out there."

"Huh?" I asked.

"Where?" the more practical half of the team asked.

"Over to the left," Nick said, without turning toward us. "In that tree."

Hutch stared in the direction.

"I can't..." He shook his head.

"Come here," Knight told him.

Slowly, the Blintz descended the few steps that separated us. Nick looked up at him.

"Hey, I don't bite," he smiled.

Gotcha.

"Okay, let me rephrase that," he conceded. "I'm not going to *bite* you. And that's a promise."

"Can you?" my partner asked. "Promise, I mean."

"Pretty much," Nick nodded. "The blood of our own kind is poisonous to us."

"Yeah?" I questioned.

"Yeah," Knight confirmed, as he moved Hutch to stand in front of him. "Listen."

I hopped down a couple of steps to watch.

"I don't...," my partner began.

"Listen," Det. Knight repeated softly. "Reach out..."

The young man closed his eyes.

I keep reminding myself that Nick's older than us by almost one hundred and fifty years. But he looks younger. And more than that, he acts younger.

Sometimes.

Right now, he looked decidedly strange. Not so much old as learned.

Know what I mean?

No?

Me neither.

"Have you found him?" Nick asked my partner.

"No. Nothing."
Hutch sounded impatient.
Knight put a hand on his shoulder.
"Close your eyes," he said.
The Blintz obeyed.
Good for him.
"Do you see the line?" Nick asked.
What line?
"There," our vampire leader nodded. "Yes. Follow it."
Hutch was frowning.
"That's the way," Knight whispered. "...And at the end of it?"
Light blue eyes opened in surprise.
"It's him," my partner blurted out.
"Yes," the other smiled. "What's he wearing?"
Wearing?
Hutch blinked, as if trying to focus on something. But he wasn't seeing with his eyes, I was sure.
"I don't think I...," my partner began. "Blue?"
"Close. Purple," Nick said, stepping away. "Pretty good."
Hutch shook his head to clear it.
"You could see him?" I asked.
My partner concentrated on me.
"Yes...kind of...maybe," he said.
I love definitive answers.
Hutch turned to Nick.
"What did you do?" he asked.
"I just showed you the way is all. It'll get easier. Come on."
He went down to the sidewalk to stand by my car.
My partner and I looked at each other. Slowly, we followed.
"Just what did you see?"
"It wasn't the way I see you, Starsk. It was more of an image, or an outline, sort of."
"Like radar or somethin'?"
He nodded, "Something like that."
Well, it wasn't quite cold, hard facts. But it was a start.
I unlocked the car doors.
"Will I be able to do that?" Hutch asked Nick.
"What?"
We got in the car. I tossed my mighty broom handle into the back seat. My partner sat up front with me. Det. Knight went in back. I would have thought that Hutch would have gotten in back with him. Or Nick would squeeze in with us. But they went to their places without a word.
Stupidly, I was relieved.
It was a shock to realize how easy it would be to get jealous of the strange hold Nick had on my partner.
"Will I be able to touch someone else's mind?" Hutch was asking.
"Possibly. It's hard to say just yet," Knight said.
"Somebody want to give me some directions here? Visiting stockyards has never been part of my daily routine," I broke in.
"Left at the corner. Then straight."
"Got it," I muttered, as I stepped on the gas.
But my partner wasn't about to let the subject drop.
"Can you do it with me," he asked, "because of the blood I...?"
That's my Hutch.
He can do something. He can think about it. But he won't say the words.
"The blood link could account for it," Nick said. "But it's not a forgone conclusion. I never could...reach Janette."
"Oh?" I asked. "What about the other one, your other, er, fledgling?"

"Maizey died before I could find out. But I think so, yes."
"How did she die?" I asked, blithely ignoring Hutch's warning look.
Nick hesitated, as if choosing his words.
Why? It seemed a simple enough question.
A tiny voice inside my head asked another question: Was Nick's link to Hutch stronger than mine?
I ignored that, too.
"...She killed herself," Nick said finally.
Oh.
Silence.
"Turn right at the next light," Knight instructed.
We drove for a while in absolute quiet, except for Nick's occasional directions.
"Park along here if you would, Starsky."
"Here?"
"Yeah. We'll walk now."
"Walk? Why?" Hutch asked.
"It's known as the slow, subtle approach."
"To a stockyard?" I questioned, as we all got out of the Torino. "What for? I can't even smell the place."
"That's the idea," Nick said. "We'll smell it before you will."
"Oh."
The Blintz didn't look too happy.
We started to walk. Nick motioned me to my partner's far side.
I nodded and got into position.
"I've often thought of all the senses I could have lived without, smell would have been at the top of the list," said Knight. "Not that you're given a choice."
I watched Hutch.
His nose was twitching.
Too bad I didn't have a carrot.
"Got it?" Nick asked.
Hutch grimaced. "Yes."
I couldn't smell a thing.
Maybe there were advantages.
"Not that it's much consolation now," our leader went on, "but it does get easier to deal with. Or at least, not so overwhelming."
"Another promise?" My partner coughed.
Knight shrugged. "It did for me."
I was getting whiffs of cow stuff myself, now.
I mean, I like hamburger. But on the hoof?
Ya got to be kidding.
But Nick wasn't.
Neither was Hutch, by the look of the sick green color he had put on.
The cattle pens came into view. They were jammed with life, moos, smells and flies.
"I think I'd rather starve," my partner croaked.
But there was something else in his voice, something more than the overpowering smell of manure.
I looked at Nick.
There wasn't much comfort in the fact that he looked worried.
"We're running out of time," he muttered. "Okay, what about horses?"
"What about 'em?" I asked.
"Do you like horses?"
"I don't. He does," pointing at Hutch, who looked as if he was grimly holding on to the contents of his stomach.
Don't think about it.
"I don't want...," my partner began.
"Listen to me," Nick cut in. "You need a large animal, or it's going to die.

Preferably a bunch of large animals. At least these are going to die soon anyway. So, it's either horses, or we raid a zoo... What do you feel about elephants?"

"Elephants?" I squawked.

I know I must have looked as stupid as I felt.

I cleared my throat, "Hemmm. Elephants?" I repeated more sedately.

Knight gave me a look.

"Do you really want me to go into detail?" he asked.

"Uh, no thanks," I said. "Horses will be fine. Won't they, Hutch?"

I turned to find my partner leaning against a building, trying his deep-breathing exercises.

"Come on, buddy," I said, trying to hustle him back to the car. "Let's get a move on."

But Nick forced his way in front of me to touch Hutch's throat.

My partner opened his eyes. They looked funny somehow. Glowing. Kind of. Only not quite.

"We don't have time for the car," Knight said crisply. "We'll have to fly."

"Fly?" I croaked.

Okay. So, it wasn't my finest hour.

"Do you want to come?" Nick asked me.

Did I?

"He can't fly," I blurted out. "He can barely stand up."

"Answer the question, Starsky," Knight snapped. "Are you with us or not?"

"Starsk?" Hutch said weakly. "You don't have to..."

"I'm in."

I couldn't hardly leave him now.

"Then get behind me, and hold on tight," Nick instructed.

He spun Hutch around and grabbed him around the chest.

I settled for Knight's waist.

"You gonna carry both of us?" I asked.

"That's the idea."

Even as I heard the words, I felt him move.

Up.

I don't know if it was just my imagination, but the ride seemed more than just "unsteady". I will admit that riding a vampire piggyback is enough to give Evel Knievel a charge.

But what was really worrying me was the way Nick kept jerking his arms. It was as if...I don't know, as if he was holding Hutch down or something. My partner was moving, or trying to. I could feel the twisting of his back against my arms. Was he trying to get away, or do something else?

The landing was definitely rough. Nick and the rest of us came down on our knees. We were outside a large, stone barn.

Any comments about his technique died in my throat, as I heard Hutch howl.

It was a howl.

And it was Hutch.

I stared at the altered face that was only just barely recognizable as my partner. He was literally foaming at the mouth. Pale eyes gleamed white.

"Hutch?" I called, reaching for him.

"Make sure the way is clear," Nick told me, as he supported the larger man.

I ran inside the barn.

I noted the huge animals stamping in their stalls, as I passed. I trotted to the end and back again. All the while, my mind was racing.

Was this what it had come down to in the end? Neat, conscientious, Hutchinson, a raving maniac? After all the blood. And the pain. And almost dying. All that, to go insane?

All that, to die before he killed?

No!

Nick was carrying my partner now. Hutch was struggling weakly.

Was that good or bad?

"Open the third stall from the end," Knight instructed.

I scrambled for the gate. I held it open, as Nick and his burden approached. I nearly lost it, when the big blond lurched for me with that strange look on his face. But Nick held him back.

I tried to stop the door from rattling off its hinges, while I watched Knight position my partner at the horse's neck. I still don't know how Nick managed to hold Hutch and somehow keep a calming hand on the animal's shoulder.

Stronger than he looks, echoed in my mind.

Knight draped long arms around the massive neck and then left the stall, elbowing his way past me.

What was he up to?

He couldn't leave Hutch like this, making noises like I never thought I'd ever hear coming from a human, much less my partner.

"Hutch?" I called softly, stepping near.

A steel vise clamped down on my shoulder and yanked me back.

It was Nick. The vise was his hand.

Definitely stronger than he looked.

But I wasn't given time to contemplate the mysteries of vampire powers.

"Here."

I was left staring at a bottle and a bunch of clean rags in my hands.

What?

"Okay, Hutch," Nick said, tapping my partner's shoulder.

My partner wasn't inclined to stop, even for air.

"Now," Knight insisted.

Somehow he pried the larger man away.

"Come with me," Nick said, pulling him out.

"No...," Hutch mumbled. "I..."

I moved up to help.

"Starsky, stay back," Knight ordered. "Look after the horse," he said, as he dragged my partner past me.

"Horse?" I questioned, as I stared at Hutch's bloodied face. "Who cares about the horse?"

"I'll take care of Hutch," said the young detective. "Someone has to tend to the horse."

Nick pulled my partner into another stall.

"Why...?" I began.

My question petered out, as I saw a red stream trickling down the animal's leg.

Why do horses have to be so big, anyway? I mean, they never looked so huge next to Randolph Scott.

I started working my way up the muscled leg with no little amount of caution. Fortunately, the beast was pretty quiet.

"Just think of me as a compact John Wayne," I muttered, as I got to the wound itself.

My partner had done this?

With his teeth?!

I finished up with a liberal splash of disinfectant. I was pulling the gate closed, when I saw Nick leading Hutch out of the other stall.

My partner was walking.

A good sign.

Right?

Not if you looked into Hutch's eyes. Haunted, trapped, horrified. Any and all of the above fit the pleading look.

"Starsk?"

It was reflex to reach for him, to comfort and reassure. But Nick was pushing him into yet another stall.

"The horse, Starsky," Knight said.

Great.

My momma didn't raise me to be no cut and bandage man to no horse.

But I took care of the animal, anyway. It was a relief to find the injury wasn't quite as deep or ragged as the one before.

It was something.

This time when I came out, I found them still in that third horse box. I peeked inside.

Nick was trying to wipe my partner's face. Hutch jerked away.

"Be still," Knight ordered.

The man stopped struggling, but it didn't stop the dejected droop of his shoulders.

"How ya doin'?" I called.

The young man nodded. "Take him outside. I'll do the horse this time."

"Gotcha."

I put an arm around my partner. Together we shuffled out of the stable.

"Come on, buddy," I urged. "Put a little life in it, will ya?"

"Who's life would you suggest?" Hutch said, shrugging my arm away. "Yours?"

We stepped out into the open.

I tried to keep it light.

"Oh, I don't know. Do you need it?"

Keep him talking.

Him talking was better than him thinking, for everybody concerned.

"Don't be an ass, Starsky," he snapped.

Okay, so it was only marginally better. But a thinking Hutch was often his own worst enemy.

"Why not?" I smiled sweetly. "We can be asses together. Wouldn't want ya out there by yourself, y'know."

He glowered.

I grinned.

"...How can you even look at me?" he asked.

"Well, you're not too hard on the eyeballs, I guess. Not as good as me, mind ya. But..."

He did look pretty good. His face was back to its normal blond handsomeness, his eyes their usual crystal blue. But that cleft between his eyebrows was working to beat the band.

"Even after what you saw in there?" Hutch asked wearily. "And before that?"

I shrugged.

It wasn't that hard.

"I've seen you all the ways there are," I said. "And now...I've just seen a few more."

"I almost killed you."

Details. Details.

"You didn't," I said.

A major plus, as far as I was concerned.

"What's to stop me next time?" he demanded.

"You," I answered smugly.

"I wasn't in that much control just now."

"So? It was your first time. Nobody's first time is perfect. ...You know what it's like now. You'll do better."

"And if I don't?"

"You will," I insisted.

Hutch shook his head.

"...I can't, Starsky."

"What can't you?" I asked, suspecting what was coming.

"I can't live like this."

Got it in one.

"You can. And you will."

"And if I kill you?"

I had to admit the possibility. But now was not the time to think about it.

"There are worse things," I said calmly.
"Like what?!" he demanded.
"Like me watchin' *you* die, dummy!"
I saw it hit him.
Good.
Let him chew on that one a while.
But I soon relented and pulled him into a hug.
"Come on, ya Blintz. There ain't nothin' you and me can't handle. Nothin'."
"...I just hope...you don't live to regret it, Starsky."
"Oh, I'll live all right. I got to. I still got plans for you and me."
"You're crazy, you know that?" Hutch smiled sadly.
"Why should I break my record now?"
"So say we all," came a third voice.
Nick.
How long had he been there?
"Never be afraid of not being alone, Hutch," Nick said.
Come again?
"Together you'll always be stronger," the young detective went on. "You can protect him. And he..."
That's me.
"...Can be the keeper of your conscience."
"Are you kiddin'?" I put in. "He don't need nothin' of the kind. That conscience of his is strung up so tight you could play Mozart on it."
"Then you'll tell him when to loosen up," Knight shrugged.
"In other words," I crowed, "nothin's changed."
"Everything's changed. I wanted to kill you," Hutch said.
"But you didn't," Nick cut in. "Starsky's right. You'll know what's coming next time. You'll know how to avoid it."
See there.
"The first time is always the worst. It will get better."
"But I almost..." my partner began.
Never let it be said the Blintz ever gave up a guilt trip easily. He fights forgiveness every step of the way.
"Hutch, shut up!"
We glared at each other.
"Listen to me," Knight said. "...I killed at my first feeding."
What?
"If I can...," Nick went on slowly, "*almost* live with that, then you can certainly live with only 'almost' killing Starsky."
"But..."
"You were with LaCroix then," I asked. "Weren't you?"
"I was with LaCroix," he agreed. "He brought me to her. I was in somewhat better shape than you, but not by much... I can't even tell you what she looked like. I drained her. And then LaCroix led me away. It was several years before I let myself really think about what I had done."
"But weren't there...?" my partner began.
"Others?" Nick supplied. "Yes. Some of which I knew about. Some of which...I can't be sure."
And Hutch thought he had such terrible sins on his conscience.
"LaCroix often stood between me and the awareness of killing. He knew that it bothered me, the realization that I could, and did, kill...so easily."
"What about LaCroix?" my partner asked.
"Death was incidental to him. It's not that he was cruel. He was indifferent. 'Mortals die. Often.' We talked about it. Often."
"How did LaCroix die?" Hutch asked, with honest curiosity.
It was like watching a curtain drop in front of Nick's face. The grief that had been apparent in his eyes those several months ago, when he had talked about his "friend" was still evident.

My partner and I glanced at each other, and nodded.
"What about the flyin'?" I asked abruptly.
Knight smiled, sadly.
"A reprieve, Starsky?" he asked.
I shrugged.
"And I'll take it," he said. "...But ask me again. You have a right to know."
"But it doesn't have to be now," said Hutch, taking up the conversation. "So, flying?"
Nick nodded. "For me, it's the best part about being immortal. It's the first thing I wanted to do after I came across. And...," he paused to look at the eastern skyline, "it's something you need to learn to do now."
"Now?!"
It was Hutch.
Actually I said something, too, but he was louder.
"Now," Knight confirmed.
"Why now?"
Hutch again.
If he was going to ask the questions, I was going to let him.
"One," Nick held up a finger, "it's the way we came, folks. Two, it'll be a lot easier on me, if you do it under your own power this time."
"You okay?" I asked him.
It had never occurred to me that Nick might be hurting.
"I'm fine," he shook his head. "I can conceivably carry the two of you again. But there's no need for it when Hutch can do it himself. And three, we have about an hour and a half of nighttime left..."
"How do you know?" I asked with a glance at my watch.
It was a quarter after four A.M.
"I know," he said to me. Then he spoke to Hutch. "You'll learn. Our only other means of transportation is hitchhiking. While Starsky will have the time to find a brave soul out driving this time of the morning, you and I might not. There are no pleasant ways for a vampire to die. Believe me, being caught by the sun is right up there among the most painful."
"Oh."
That was me.
"...So what do I do?"
And that was Hutch.
"First, you can stop acting like you're going to be lynched. Look, you control the speed and height. You're not going to fall."
"If you say so," said my partner, flatly.
"What about me?" I spoke up.
"We should be able to rig up something so we both can carry you. It'll be a lot more stable."
"I'm all in favor of stable," I said.
"But first, a few preliminaries. Do you," meaning me, "want to ride in back again?" he said, pointing to his back.
"No thanks," I said, raising my hands. "I'll just watch."
"Okay," Nick nodded. "You ready, Hutch?"
Hutch took a breath, "As I'm going to get."
"Another trick of the mind," Knight said. "You can do what you think you can do."
"I tried to fly once, when I was a kid," said my partner. "It didn't work."
"I stand corrected. It will work now. For this. ...There's not much of a breeze."
"You need the wind?" I asked.
"Not really. But it gives you something to focus on. Okay, Hutch, think about what you want to do. You're going to levitate about three feet above the ground. Nothing spectacular."

"It sounds spectacular enough to me," my partner observed. "I don't happen to belong three feet above the ground."

The young man sighed.

"Okay," he admitted. "Maybe not. But right now, you don't have any choice. So, shut up, and think about it."

I approved.

Maybe Nick was learning how to handle the Blintz after all.

Hutch closed his mouth with a snap. Then he closed his eyes.

"Now then," Knight said. "Feel the breeze on your face. Imagine it blowing you along, like a kite. And then you feel yourself going...up," he finished, with a gasp.

I opened my own eyes to find my partner still solidly on the ground. But Nick? His feet were floating at the level of our shoulders. He grinned down at us.

"That's more than three feet," grumbled Hutch.

Knight didn't stop grinning.

"Sue me," he said.

Then he came down.

"Let's try it again," he said. "You can do it."

"How did you do it?" I asked.

"I don't know. I just know that it works. And it's what I'll miss most, if I ever become human again. ...You ready, Hutch?"

My partner shrugged.

What could he say?

I was running out of things myself.

"Give me your hand," Nick told him. "And no, it doesn't mean we're engaged."

The shock on Hutch's face mirrored mine.

"How did you...?" he began.

"What...?" was my only contribution.

"It was written all over you," Nick laughed. "I don't read minds. ...Well, not usually."

"You can?!"

"Hey, turn down the stereo, will you?" Knight protested. "Special circumstances. Certain people. I could do it with LaCroix, for instance."

"Him again," Hutch sighed.

"Always 'him again'," Nick agreed. "But we're getting away from the point here. Flight with the birdies. Or the bats, if you prefer."

"I prefer to walk if..."

"We've already been through this," our senior vampire interrupted. He took hold of my partner's wrist. "Now, close your eyes and think yourself up."

I watched them this time. And sure enough, they both went up.

Let me tell you, you haven't lived until you've found some big, blond, boots about level with your nose, all the while realizing there's a Blintz standing on them.

But from the look on Hutch's face, the view from up there must have been pretty startling, too.

"Take it easy," Nick tried to soothe. "Don't look down."

Do they always say that?

"Look at me," the young man said.

Okay, variations on a theme.

"Now, look out and beyond."

"How come I'm not wobbly?" Hutch asked.

"'Cause you're not supposed to be," I called up.

"Shut up, Starsky."

Sometimes I think those are Hutch's favorite words.

"He's right, you know," Nick said. "You're as steady as you want to be."

"See there," I called.

"Now," the young man said, "we're going to go down."

"How?" Hutch asked suspiciously.

Never take anything on faith, is my Blintz's motto.

"Under control," Nick said calmly. "Like going down the stairs. In your mind. Slowly. We're going. To go. Down."

And down they came.

"It's a lot easier comin' down than goin' up, seems like," I commented.

"Isn't it usually?" my partner muttered.

Aw, Hutch.

"Okay, one more time," Knight said briskly, "by yourself. And then we have to go."

By himself?

But I saw what he meant, when Hutch rose shakily from the ground and descended in short order with a ca-chunk.

"Wobbly" doesn't cover it.

"It's supposed to be easy," Nick smiled.

"Sure." Hutch wasn't convinced.

"Starsky, you'd better ride with me," Knight said. "I don't think he's ready for passengers yet."

"Me neither," I agreed.

Our leader shrugged. *No choice*.

I knew that.

We took off. Me, in the loop of Nick's arm. Hutch, struggling to keep even with us. Every once in a while, my ride would reach out a hand to steady my fluctuating partner. During that time, Hutch would take a deep breath and then plow ahead with grim determination. I almost forgot my own fear of heights for watching him.

"Don't forget my car," I said.

"I remember," Nick nodded, as we headed down.

And there she was, patiently waiting, like always. The Torino gleamed red with her streak of white under the street light.

Hiya, baby, I patted her hood as we touched down.

"Tell you what," Nick said. "Why don't you and Hutch drive to your place? I'll wait for you there."

"You'll what?" I almost bristled.

Who did he think...?

"I don't have stop lights," he smiled.

I was still staring when he lifted off and disappeared.

"You gotta admit, it could be a neat way of gettin' around. No traffic jams or nothin'," I said, as I opened up my car.

"I'm more interested in getting there in one piece, thank you," Hutch grumbled.

"Oh, I don't know," I said, as we got inside. "Maybe I'm just getting used to it."

"I'm glad you are."

Oh brother.

"Have I told ya, Hutch, there are times when you can be a real pain."

"...I know."

As we started out, I glanced over at him to see him lean back, eyes closed, his head perched on the back rest.

"How ya doin'?" I asked.

"Okay, I guess."

Okay?

"Come on, Blintz. Throw in a few descriptive phrases there, will ya?"

"Well, my head feels like it might stay attached for a while. My stomach has stopped its tumbling routine. And my heart's not being squeezed by barbed wire any more. Okay?"

"You felt like that?" I demanded.

"Something like it. That and the fact I wanted to drink blood. Your blood."

Give it a rest, will ya?

"...What about Nick?" I asked.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Did you want Nick's blood?"

"Why would I...?"

Then he stopped.

That's the way, Blintz. Get those little, blond, brain cells working on something useful. Useful in this case being anything that wasn't guilt.

"Well, did you?" I prompted.

"...No. No, I didn't. It was your heart I was hearing."

"My heart?"

"Yes, I could hear it pumping blood."

"And Nick?"

"No, I don't think so," Hutch frowned. "It was like he didn't exist...except to stop me from getting to you."

Persistent cuss, ain't he?

"He said somethin'," I tried again, "about the blood of other vampires bein' poisonous to you."

"So?"

"So, maybe that instinct he was talkin' about was tellin' you that he wasn't good to eat."

"Maybe. But I don't see what good that does, if it lets him go and kills you."

"You ain't gonna kill me."

"How can you be sure, if I'm not?"

"'Cause I'm not about to make it easy for you," I pointed out.

"Do you think you can stop me? Now?"

Okay, what do I say to that? I had a hard enough time stopping him when he was a *regular* Hutch.

"...Nick can," I said weakly.

"I don't think he counts."

"Why not?"

"For one thing, he's not my partner. For another, he's probably stronger than the two of us put together."

"You think so?" I asked, as I pulled in front of my apartment.

I looked up at my window.

"I think so," Hutch whispered.

"...Can you tell if he's up there?" I asked.

My partner was staring up there, too.

"I don't know, Starsky. I think maybe so. But I'm not sure. I just...."

"Don't worry about it. You'll learn."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Come on, let's get you inside. I don't want no French-fried partner."

"In a minute."

"What's the matter?" I asked. "You feelin' bad again?"

"No. I'm fine. I just don't want to see him just yet."

"Why not?"

Hutch shook his head, "Nothing."

"Don't give me 'nothin', Blintz. Talk to me."

"I...I resent him."

"'Resent'?!" I exploded. "He saved your life. Mine, too, probably."

"There's no 'probably' about it, Starsky. I didn't say it made any sense."

"So, why 'resent'?"

"I want...I want my old life back."

"Your old life would have been dead."

"You want to explain that?"

"Don't you pull any of that educated garbage on me, Hutchinson. You know

what I mean. Miranda had plans for you and none of 'em good. If you had died, I would have been left with the resentin'. An' I would have been resentin' you for lettin' it happen."

"Me?" he sputtered. "I didn't have any choice!"

"Not with Miranda, no. But you did have a choice with Nick. He offered you a way out and you took it. Don't you go resentin' the life he gave you. In our old life, Miranda would have had her hooks in you. If she had you, she had me. An' slavery ain't my idea of a good time."

"I...," he sputtered out. "I'm...sorry, Starsk. I know...I know it's no easier for you than me."

"It's about time you realized that," I grumped. "What you go through, *we* go through. Nick said we were the strongest together. Who should know that better than us?"

"Ah, Starsky. What would I do without you?"

"Just you don't go tryin' to find out. Now, move it, partner, before I light a fire under you myself."

We got out of the car.

"Can he hear us, do you think?" I asked, looking up again.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised. ...Why do you think he did it? He went against his own kind to help us."

We started up the stairs.

"I think he's lonely."

"Huh?"

"You know what I mean, Hutch. I think he's been alone a long time."

"Yeah, I guess so. But he had a friend once, that LaCroix. I wonder what happened there."

"I gotta feelin' that we'll be findin' out sometime and we'll be sorry we asked."

"You may be right."

"I am sometimes, y'know."

"Miracles do happen upon occasion," he agreed solemnly.

But his eyes were smiling.

We're getting there.

"Hey!" I asked, suddenly remembering. "What about that watchdog we had?"

"Watchdog? Oh, him."

Hutch did a slow turn.

"There," he pointed. "I think, he's there."

It was a different position than before.

Okay by me.

"As long as he leaves us alone," I shrugged.

"You believe me?"

"Of course, I believe you. What else am I going to do?"

"A certain amount of healthy skepticism wouldn't be amiss."

"I ran out a couple of days ago," I said, as I pushed open the front door.

Nick was nowhere to be seen. I glanced at Hutch. He pointed to the bedroom. We went to the door way to see the young detective standing by the window, looking out.

"You shouldn't worry about observin' our privacy, y'know."

"Everyone needs a little, now and then," Knight said.

"Was it like that with you and LaCroix?" Hutch asked.

"Not quite. I lived with him for a while. Even when I had my own house, I still spent most of my time with him. I had very few secrets from him."

"Didn't that bother you?" my partner asked.

"Not usually, no. It seemed right that he be there. He was like an extension of myself. But every once in a while, it would hit me, like when I'd come across a drawing of myself doing something I had not only not posed for, but was not really meant for public consumption..."

"A drawing?" I asked.

"He was an artist. He made incessant drawings. Since I was usually around, he made a lot of sketches of me. Some of them were very flattering. Some were not."

"You were good friends," I said.

"Yes. More than friends. Not like you two. But he was very much a part of me. He still is. I was with him a long time."

"How long does it take to learn about being a vampire?" Hutch asked.

"I guess that depends on how much you want to know. Janette left us after three weeks."

"Three weeks?"

Talk about one quick change of life.

"That's a little short, maybe. But it tends to run from that to a couple of months. I don't expect you to take much more than a month."

"You think so?"

"It's hard to say, but I think so. You're strong..."

"I am?"

"Trust me," said Knight. "You are. And you're not alone. That's hard combination to beat."

"How long was it for you?" I asked. "With LaCroix, I mean."

"Eighteen years."

Nick laughed. Probably at mine and Hutch's expressions.

"You see, LaCroix was much more than just... Well, I don't guess anyone is 'just' a master. It is a unique relationship, whether you come into the Life voluntarily or not. LaCroix was so many things to me--teacher, friend, brother, father... He taught me so many things. So much more than immortality: art, history, literature, people, myself...."

Knight paused.

You could almost see the memories passing through his mind.

Then he whispered, "And I killed him."

Shock.

"What?!"

"I killed him," he repeated.

And he waited.

For what?

Condemnation?

"How?"

"Why?"

I don't know which of us asked what. But this was what we had a right to know.

"...We were fighting," the young man began. "He killed a woman I...I was interested in. I got angry. ...I pinned him...to a wall with a wooden slat. And then...I watched the fire...melt him away..."

Fire?

What fire?

Not now, Starsky, I told myself. Details could come later, if ever. Whatever Nick had done, he had paid for. And was still paying, from the look of him.

He saved Hutch.

That was all I needed to know.

"I want you both to remember," Nick went on, "that I have killed. There's a lot of blood on my hands, both figuratively and literally. Don't ever forget it."

"Don't trust you, you mean?" Hutch asked.

"...That probably is a good idea."

And how do you answer that one?

"We have to trust you," my partner said. "We don't have anyone else."

"That's true," Knight said sadly. "A few other..."

"That's not the only reason," I spoke up.

"It's the best reason you've got."

"No. You helped us. You saved Hutch," I stumbled along, praying for the right words to come. "Regardless of what you may have been, that's what you are now. And we're grateful, Hutch an' me."

Nick was actually embarrassed. It really is too bad that vampires can't blush. I bet he could have given the Blintz a run for his money.

"...Thank you."

"You're welcome," came the chorus.

Knight walked into the living room. We followed.

"What about work?" he asked, stopping in front of the couch.

"Work?" I asked.

"Yes, Starsky," my partner commented in fine "Hutchian" form. "Cops and robbers. Remember?"

"Oh, that work," I shrugged.

"Right," Nick nodded. "If you decide to keep with the 'cops', Starsky's going to have to talk to your captain about Hutch switching to the night shift, permanently."

"Oh, Dobey's going to love it," my partner said. "But why does Starsky have to talk to him? What about me?"

"Because you're going to be asleep. Either you let Starsky handle it, or you can talk to him after the sun goes down tomorrow."

"I'll do it," Hutch said grimly.

"We'll both do it," I said. "I'm transferrin', too. Remember?"

"Fine. Now, you," he said to my partner, "should probably be getting ready for bed."

"Why?"

"Hutch's been takin' care of his bedtime for quite a while now," I explained reasonably.

"Because in about a half an hour, it'll be daylight, and you're going to be asleep," Nick said.

"How come?"

"I don't know how, or why, I just know that's what happens. As you get older, you'll get stronger. But right now, come the sun, you're out of it."

"What about you?"

"I can function. I don't always like it. But I can get around, out of the light."

"When will I be able to do that?" Hutch asked.

"When you can," Nick shrugged. "That's all I can tell you. I'm sorry."

"This vampire stuff ain't quite an exact science, is it?" I asked.

"Not hardly. Another thing, try not to leave Hutch alone for very long during the daytime. I was known to sleepwalk in my early days."

"Sleepwalk? ...Hey, wait a minute. You goin' somewhere?"

"To my apartment, and if I don't leave soon, I won't make it."

"But...," Hutch protested.

"I know you still have questions. I'll be back tomorrow. If nothing else, you still have to feed."

"Great. Just how often do I have to go through all this?" my partner demanded.

"Like tonight? Never again. The first time happens only once. But...," Nick went on, "you still have to feed."

"And how often is that?"

"Every night for the next couple of weeks. After that, it'll stretch out a little."

"Should I be grateful?" Hutch grumbled.

"You should, in a way," the other nodded. "Be grateful that you live in an age where packaged blood is so relatively easy to obtain. Be grateful that there are drugs now that will stop both human and animal blood from congealing. There was a time, when I didn't even dream of such luxuries."

"Luxuries?" Hutch sputtered.

"Oh, yes. Blood is a fact of life for you now. The most difficult obstacle is overcoming the idea that you need to drink blood to live."

"My life for someone else's," my partner said bitterly.

"It doesn't have to be like that. If it did, I would have been dead long ago."

Suicide.

He meant suicide.

I looked at Hutch and saw him get the message, too. And there was something else in my partner's expression. I wasn't sure I knew what it was. But I didn't think I liked it.

"You can learn to deal with the hunger. It's not easy, and you won't necessarily like it. But it can be done."

"He'll work on it," I promised.

That got me a glare from glacial blue eyes.

Too bad, Hutch.

Starskys are impervious to those particular expressions from blond Blintzes.

It's a good thing, too, I sighed.

"I have to go," said Nick.

Hutch nodded, resigned.

I wasn't.

"Why are you leaving?" I asked. "One night is hardly a month, y'know. We're not ready."

"I'll be back. You both need to think about what's happened and talk about it. And you need to be able to talk and know I can't hear you."

"But...," I protested.

"Let it go, Starsky," said my partner softly.

Any doubts I might have had about the link between Hutch and Nick overshadowing my place in his life died then. My partner wanted the other gone.

"You can't believe you're ready?" I asked Hutch.

"He'll be back," my partner shrugged. "...Tomorrow?" he asked Nick.

So. He wasn't quite *that* anxious. Hutch just wanted the comfort of the partnership, of "me and thee".

"Tomorrow," our senior vampire confirmed. "If something comes up, call me. I left my number by the phone."

"Good," came the soft reply.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"See you then," Nick waved his hand, as he went through the open front door.

I followed him out and shut said door.

"Why are you going? Really?" I asked.

The young man pointed to the door.

"He can hear us, you know."

"I know," I said impatiently. "The illusion of privacy, remember? So answer the question, and then you can get out of here."

"Okay," he said conceding defeat. "I...don't belong here. If Hutch survives..."

"If?" I picked up with alarm.

Knight ,held up both hands to shut me up.

"I think he will. But it'll be because of you, not me. I can supply the answers you need. And you do need them to survive," Nick admitted. "But the emotional stability he gets from you is every bit as vital. Perhaps even more so because of the way he came across. Without it, he wouldn't be here to ask the questions. And that's something only you can give him."

Me and thee.

"Was it like that with you and LaCroix?" I asked.

"Yes. ...I'll be back tomorrow. Early. ...Take care, Starsky. Take care of each other."

He turned and left.

I was getting used to this stuff. I watched him fly off with no amazement at

all.

Almost.

I went back inside.

"He's got me down pretty good, doesn't he?" Hutch greeted.

"He's got us both. So, get to bed already."

"Starsky," he bantered.

"Starsky nothin'. You heard him. You want me to have t'drag you across the floor when you collapse?"

"That might not happen."

"And how many things has he been wrong about?" I countered.

My partner shrugged.

"Okay then," I tried again. "Just how badly do you want to find out if vampires can get black and blue?"

"...I'll sleep out here," he said, pointing to the sofa.

"An' how do I explain the zonked-out Blintz on my couch? The one that won't wake up? Believe me, I tried last night, er, yesterday, and you wouldn't budge. If it hadn't been for Nick, I mighta called an ambulance."

Hutch sighed.

Gotcha.

Into the bedroom we went. He started peeling down. I glanced out the window, as I pulled the blinds.

It was getting light.

I turned to find Hutch sitting on the edge of the mattress.

"You know," he said, "I can't help but wonder ho-o-w..."

And that was it.

He plopped back on the bed like a long blond drink of water. Only a lot drier.

I grinned, as I swung his legs up and tucked him in.

Another one for the good guys, I thought.

I lay down on top of the blankets beside him, too tired to move.

We'd worry about everything later.

- The End -

[Two prequels to this tale appeared in the first issue of GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS. In "Instinct," Starsky and Hutch met Nick on a case, and noticed he was a little strange, but shrugged it off. Mostly, they were just grateful for his having saved Hutch's life. In the second prequel, "Choices," Hutch was attacked by the vicious female vampire Miranda; given the choice between a Renfield-like existence and the Change, Hutch agreed to have Nick bring him across.

It also might be of interest that a series of four tales by B.N. Fish about Nick's early life with LaCroix appeared in Just My Type, available from Mystery Frank, 145 LaFontenay Dr., Louisville, KY 40223-3123. It should be noted that some stories in Just My Type contain same-sex situations, although no age statement is required.

The next tale in the series of STARSKY AND HUTCH/NICK KNIGHT crossovers will appear in GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 3.]

FACE OF THE PAST

I stared at the face of the past,
saw its tortured lips cry.
Arms outflung, legs curled like a baby.
He suffocated, so history tells us
from volcanic gasses
and was buried in the ash and stones
of a great eruption.

Cast in plaster, his image lives on,
forever reaching to escape, to live:
And recognized only because he died.

I stared into the past.
Found it frightening and wonderful.
Man's greatness, man's depravity,
all laid out in front of me
like an enormous painting.

Heroes and kings, gods and demons,
war and peace, good times and bad.
The places change. Man doesn't.

-Lisa Savignano

UNTITLED

When I was alive, my dreams were filled
with light and sound.
I was a King, a Lord, or just myself
and when they were over I would awaken happily in my bed.

But now my dreams are different,
and I can't tell where my dreams end
and my nightmares begin.

It starts out with flying,
soaring above the earth with no cares
to tie me down.
I see the earth below me:
Is it really so far away?
And the night turns to day.

The sun stabs at me,
wounding me with fiery spears.
I crash to the ground,
burning,
burning with the white heat of the sunrise.
I lay there as the sun rises,
unable to move, only to burn.
My flesh lies in rags, but the flames do not die.
My day passes in feverish delirium,
but finally, the sun sets.
The cool is a relief.
And the earth swallows me.

With darkness around me, I fall,
darkness even I cannot pierce.
It seems like forever,
but then, in a moment,
I fall into liquid and lie there alone.

I stand, my bones grinding against one another,
and it is not water, but blood which surrounds me:
Calling softly, "Drink! Drink, and be fulfilled."

I am parched.
My lips, my tongue, my throat,
all cry out to be quenched.
And the smell of it!
Oh, sweet agony!
Delicious torture!
And it is all mine for the taking.

I try to remember my vow,
but vows have no place here.
With a sob catching in my throat,
I bend to drink.

Warm rivers of blood pour through me,
but my hunger continues on.
I drink, I drink and drink.
The hot life fills me,
transforming me,
making me whole once again.

But when I open my eyes,
I am bending over a young child,
his throat ripped out.
The blood in my mouth tastes like him,
and I spit it out.
But his eyes still watch me.
All of their eyes watch me,
the eyes of everyone I have ever killed.
They say nothing, but the judgment
Of those silent, accusing eyes is enough.
There is nowhere to run,
nowhere to hide from the horrible weight
of their stares.

As one, they rise,
moving forward with grim purpose.
Cruel fingers rip hunks of flesh from my bones.
They are eating me! Eating me alive!
As they nibble the raw flesh, they crumple and die,
souls going on to the final rest.
Though I am only so much,
the stream is unending,
and I die once again 'neath the cold, grasping hands.

Once I awoke so happily from dreaming,
but now blood-sweat runs off me as I rise from the sheets.
I check to make sure that I was only dreaming,
knowing whenever I tire the true horror begins.

-Lisa Savignano

MIAMI VICE was often referred to as "MTV Cops" because of its flashy style and effective use of music. It aired on NBC-TV from 1984-89. The basic story line dealt with veteran vice cop Sonny Crockett (Don Johnson) and the drug scene in Miami. Along with fighting the Drug War and corruption, Sonny divorced his first wife, Caroline (Belinda Montgomery)(first season), suffered through several doomed romances, and finally (fourth season) married Caitlin Davies (Sheena Easton), an internationally acclaimed rock star who was killed by Frank Hackman (Guy Boyd); Sonny had helped release Hackman from prison under the mistaken belief that Hackman was innocent of the crime for which he had been convicted--killing Crockett's partner. Stress and guilt blunted Crocekтt's edge and he was injured in a boat explosion (end of fourth season), suffering amnesia. During the four-episode bout with amnesia, Crockett took on the coldness of his undercover persona, Sonny Burnett, and was responsible for several deaths; he also took over a drug empire. When he regained his memory he was ordered to see psychiatrists and allowed back on the job (standard procedure for Miami, where it's hard to find a cop who hasn't got an arrest record). At the end of the fifth season, Crockett and his partner, Ricardo Tubbs (Philip Michael Thomas), survived a suicide mission to Costa Morada in pursuit of General Borbon (Ian McShane), a CIA-backed drug dealer. In the course of the investigation, Crockett and Tubbs discovered that corruption in the police department included Captain Hightower. When both Hightower and Borbon were killed, Crockett and Tubbs had two choices: be killed by Agent Baker and his men, or throw down their badges and leave Miami. They chose the latter, since NBC was selling the show into syndication (USA network) and didn't want to kill off its main characters.

Rumors have abounded that either a theatrical-release or made-for-TV MIAMI VICE movie is planned, though nothing has been substantiated.

A JOB I CAN SINK MY TEETH INTO

by

Karen Howard

"Moon over Miami. Never thought I'd see that again."

Sonny Crockett grinned. "We're addicted, pal."

Rico Tubbs returned the smile. "Or stuck."

It was a warm spring evening, not long after Daylight Savings Time began, and the pair was cruising west on the MacArthur Causeway toward Miami, the city they thought they'd left behind forever. The skyline seemed to glow in the fading light.

"I can't believe we're back." Sonny ran a hand through his blond hair. He hadn't cut it since he'd last been in Miami, and had taken to wearing it in a ponytail. "I thought I'd spend the rest of my retirement looking over my shoulder for Baker and his cohorts."

"Yeah," his partner chuckled. "The fabulous Baker Boys."

"We can laugh now."

"If Marty hadn't gone to bat for us..."

"And if Moscow was still a threat..."

They looked at each other and laughed, more to relieve tension than anything. They'd spent the day on Miami Beach, reminiscing and catching up, pretending everything was fine and the Feds responsible for their early retirement didn't exist. Martin Castillo didn't expect them for another twenty minutes, so Rico took the long way around, through downtown.

"Place sure has changed." Sonny pointed at a new mini-mall at the corner of Flagler and Biscayne.

"Makes you wonder if the recession's almost over. The renovations on South Beach mean money."

"People take chances. For every running operation, there's at least a dozen that died."

Rico knew the hard exterior his partner was displaying hid the same sadness he felt. Miami had changed. Was it true you could never go home again?

"At least the ambiance hasn't changed," he commented as they passed electronics stores blasting the latest hits. It was early evening, time to shut down. Stores were closing and office workers heading for parking garages or bus stops. He began to wonder why he'd taken Flagler instead of sweeping around to Brickell and cutting over from there. Nostalgia, he decided.

"Wonder what Marty's got for us." Crockett settled back in the seat and watched the parade of humanity.

"He said a dealer nobody's been able to get close to."

"Bull."

"He missed us." He caught Crockett's look and they both laughed. "It must be a pretty big case."

"Why, you consider us the big guns?"

"Outsiders."

"Consultants, Rico. He'll take us to that Thai place in the Gables, we'll

talk about nothing in particular until after dinner, then he'll ask our opinion. Check comes, he pays, we shake hands in the parking lot and go home."

"Think it'll be that easy?"

"What else? We're not cops anymore, so we can't take the case. We're outside consultants."

They stopped for a red light. "Might be something to consider."

"Crockett and Tubbs, Consultants." He shook his head. "Naw. No ring to it."

"Tubbs and Crockett."

"The light changed, partner."

* * *

The rental car crested the 2nd Avenue drawbridge and made the left into the nearly empty lot at the Organized Crime Bureau's undercover location. Obviously Martin Castillo was the only one expecting them. Neither of them made a move to get out of the car.

"You feel like I do?" Rico asked after several minutes of silence.

"Depends how you feel."

"Creepy. Like I don't belong here anymore."

Sonny flipped the door handle. "You forget, pal, I went through this before."

Rico took a breath and let it out before following his ex-partner. This time Crockett would enter the building in full control of his faculties, not after a two-month bout with amnesia that had him doing things Crockett in his right mind would never have done.

It was quiet, the daily clatter of typewriters, computer printers, telephones and voices stilled. Three toilets flushed in sequence in the first floor ladies room and Sonny wondered if Pepe was still the night janitor. They took their time climbing the stairs to the second floor and paused at the bank of lockers outside the swinging doors of room 204. Inside, the lights were off except for the overheads in Castillo's office. Mercifully, they could not see their old desks clearly.

Sonny gave one of the doors a shove and stepped aside. "After you."

Rico brushed past and walked briskly to Martin's office, not wanting to revive old memories. He kept his eyes straight ahead, ignoring a photo of two smiling kids on his old desk. The word "replacement" came to mind, but he pushed it aside.

Martin was waiting for them; he had probably heard them enter the building. Sometimes, Rico decided, the man was spooky. He'd once called him "Charles Bronson by way of Havana", but there'd been a stop somewhere in the East.

Sonny had always been closer, the only one on the team to call him Marty. They shook hands, greeting each other warmly. Rico felt restrained, self-conscious. He shook hands and joined Sonny on the familiar black leather couch. Martin pulled a chair close and sat in front of them.

"What's up?" Crockett joked. "Got a case your team can't crack?"

Martin was grim, and there were fresh lines around his eyes and mouth, making him look old. His eyes were the same, though: dark, deep, impenetrable. For a long time he regarded his old colleagues, then leaned forward, elbows on knees.

"I've lost two people."

The silence made the office like a tomb for perhaps two minutes before Sonny broke it. "What?"

The story started in Central America, with the son of a drug lord who was willing to risk everything to get what he wanted. Rather than rule in splendor in his home country, Roberto Cervantes had come to Miami. Martin filled them in on what little they had: owner of large tracts of land and employer of thousands from dirt farmers growing cocoa plants to mules carrying drugs into the U.S. The description Martin gave them was simple: nearly 6-feet tall, dark hair and eyes, olive complexion, scar at the corner of his right eye.

After a pause, Sonny looked up. "That's it?"

"Yes."

"What about family background?" Rico queried.

"Sketchy." His grandfather, Rudolfo, had appeared on the scene sixty years earlier, rising from obscurity to take over the empire of Octavio Quezeda. "He moved onto Quezeda's estate and nothing was heard from Quezeda afterwards."

"Probably killed," Crockett assumed. "What about the grandson's family? Wife? Kids?"

"Wife, no children."

"Where's he living?"

The answer surprised them: Bay Drive on Miami Beach, not the prestige or high-security of Star Island or one of the other neighborhoods drug dealers favored. Rico made a guess that Roberto wanted privacy, access to Biscayne Bay, and no guard to monitor his comings and goings.

* * *

"This should be interesting," Crockett commented dryly as a truck cut them off.

"We've handled weird dealers before."

"Yeah, but are we outta practice?" He motioned. "Better hang a left here unless you want to go over the bridge."

They were heading north on NW 27th Avenue because Sonny insisted on dinner at Falcon's. Construction blocked both sides of the road and the median. Rico cut left, maneuvering through back streets.

"So much for Marty springing for Thai." He stopped at a corner and looked both ways.

"You had your chance for health food."

He returned his partner's grin. "I can put up with it for one night." He pulled into an empty space beside the diner. "We're not sanctioned."

"Probably just as well. I'd hate to think what'd happen if some of our old contacts found out we're back in town."

They ordered fresh dolphin and talked about the case. Rico was more concerned with being an outsider than his partner was. Sonny argued that they weren't actually on the case, just getting a feel for the enemy so Castillo's people could move in easier.

"Makes me feel weird," Rico admitted. "We leave and our replacements get blown away."

"They didn't replace us, pal. We left a void and they filled it. If it hadn't been them, it would've been somebody else. Don't blame yourself." He popped a french fry in his mouth. "That's my job."

"How do you want to work it?"

* * *

The plan was simple: Izzy Moreno, their old snitch, was still connected with Miami's network of dealers and low-lifes, and it was easy for him to wrangle an invitation to a party where the Cervantes would be guests.

"Almost forgot how much fun this is," Rico commented as they walked through the crowded room. Furniture was at a minimum, guests at a maximum, and there was virtually no room to breathe, although neither Crockett nor Tubbs was interested in what their fellow guests were breathing.

"Well, hello." A dark-haired woman came up beside Sonny and slipped her arm through his. She was of slight build with olive complexion and eyes so brown they looked black--the face and figure men admired.

He never lost his composure, giving her a smile reserved for old friends and beautiful women. "Hello."

"I haven't seen you before."

"I've been out of town."

"I'm Inez Cervantes."
"Sonny Burnett. This is my associate, Ricardo Cooper."
"Mr. Cooper." She slipped her free arm through his. "Come, let's mingle."

* * *

"Well, that was easy," Rico commented on the way back to the hotel.
"Almost too easy. Think somebody made us?"
"That's what's been missing."
Sonny was puzzled. "What?"
"Cynicism."
"I'm a skeptic, not a cynic."
"Whatever. Waiting for the other shoe to drop."
"Of all the people at the party, why'd she hook up with us?"
"'Of all the gin joints...'" He grinned. "Don't under estimate your attraction to the fair sex."
"She wants to see me again." He watched Tubbs' eyebrows go up a notch. "When you were dancing with...what was her name?"
"Cynthia."
"She cornered me at the hors d'oeuvre table."
"What about hubby?"
"He was in the other room."
"So?" he asked when Crockett didn't continue.
"I'll see if Marty wants me to follow-up. This could be the break they've been waiting for."

* * *

Martin agreed, and Sonny attended a dinner party thrown by the Cervantes. Alone. Tubbs had not been invited. After a few phone calls, he found companionship for the evening--there were still a few females who remembered him--but was in the suite when Crockett returned just before dawn.
"Hope you didn't wait up." Sonny draped his jacket over the back of a chair.
"Only got in an hour ago myself. How'd it go?"
"The lady definitely has the hots for yours truly, and that's not wishful thinking. She spent more time with me than her husband."
"I hope he's not the jealous type."
"On the contrary, he spent the evening with another woman."
"Swingers?"
"In this day and age with AIDS?"
"Some people like to play Russian roulette." He sat up in bed. "She come on strong?"
"With finesse." He talked as he finished undressing and slid into bed. "It wasn't so much what she said as what she implied." He yawned. "Robbie-boy's going to be out of town for a few days, and I'm invited to dinner."
"Are you the main course?"
"Funny, pal." He flicked off the bedside lamp. "Good night."

* * *

Rico was more prophetic than he realized when Sonny found it increasingly difficult to tactfully evade Inez' advances. When she stood beside him, their bodies touched; when they talked, she touched him almost constantly, laying a hand on his arm or touching his shoulder. It was flattering, but quite obvious that she had designs on Sonny T. Burnett.
The sky was turning from black velvet to blue satin when she finally gave him breathing room, slinking across the room to close the drapes.
"Such a shame our night has to end." She stood with her back to the drapes,

her skin pale against the fabric.

"Does it?" Much as he didn't want to be caught fooling around with a dealer's wife, he had to keep up his cover.

"I'm afraid so." She pouted. "But you will come back tonight." It wasn't a question.

"Of course."

She walked him to the door, where he was surprised when the kiss he'd expected was little more than a quick peck on the cheek. She went to the foot of the stairs and turned to look at him. He said good night and let himself out.

Driving back to the Embassy Suites, he considered her actions. Perhaps Rico was right and Inez and Roberto were swingers. Then again, she might be genuinely attracted to Sonny Burnett. Hers might be a loveless marriage, evidence of which was Roberto's attention to other women. There were worse things than loneliness, but offhand he couldn't think of one. Even dealers' wives got lonely.

* * *

Rico's casual comment that Roberto might not be out of town made Sonny uneasy. Inez was, after all, seeing him in the evening. They spent the night together, chaste though their time together was, but that didn't mean that Roberto wasn't home during the day. Not wanting to blow Vice's case by cuckolding an enraged husband, Sonny called Marty and requested a daytime stake out of the Cervantes house.

"I'll call you before I go over there tonight."

"Have you learned anything?"

"Only that Inez is a charming hostess. I wish there was more, Marty. I'm sorry."

"You're the only in we have."

"For all the good I'm doing."

"Cultivate it."

Which meant spending the night with Inez, walking around the pool, watching the stars, sipping Dom Perignon and talking. When she talked about art, he held his own by remembering research he'd done on a case years ago, when the art world had nearly lost a Madonna to kidnappers. He didn't mention the ransom of heroin.

"You fascinate me, Sonny." Her voice was low, throaty, sensual. In other circumstances he would have found this willowy woman attractive. "I talk of art and you tell me stories I've never heard. I talk of music and you surprise me with your knowledge. Tell me, is there anything you don't know?"

"There's probably a lot more I don't know than I do."

"I love the way you phrase." Her finely manicured hand rested on his forearm. "I enjoy your company."

"I enjoy yours."

"Is that why you come to me every night?"

He was uncomfortable with the implication. "It's why I visit, yes."

Her eyes twinkled when she smiled. "You wonder if I'm sexually attracted to you."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Would it surprise you if I said no?"

"Yes," he answered truthfully.

"Why?"

That flustered him. "I guess every man wants to be attractive to women."

"That isn't the reason." She made him more uncomfortable by moving closer. He felt her thigh against his and wanted to get up from the sofa and cross the room.

"Then what is the reason?"

"*That*, Mr. Burnett." She continued when his expression reflected his puzzlement. "I am intimate with you, yet not sexually. We touch, but superficially. Are you sexually attracted to me?"

"Any man would be."

"Would you like to make love to me?"

There it was, laid out like a poker hand. Ante up or fold. The only problem was, the cards were all face down and he had no idea what he'd been dealt.

"I won't embarrass you." She didn't give him the opportunity to answer. "You're being gallant. I'm a married woman, after all."

"I have met my share of jealous husbands."

She returned his smile. "I'm sure you have. But you wouldn't like Roberto when he's angry. I think you sense that."

"He's a powerful man."

"More powerful than you can imagine."

"Powerful men can be dangerous."

"So can powerful women."

"Are you powerful, Inez?"

"In some ways I am more powerful than even Roberto."

* * *

"How far do you want me to push?" Sonny asked Martin the next afternoon. "I haven't found out a damn thing about the husband, and the wife's playing sex games. Thinks she wants to have an affair but isn't sure, so she doesn't get close enough to the flame to singe her wings."

"We've watched the house. The husband hasn't been in or out."

"Anybody see him leave?"

"No."

"Wouldn't it be a kicker if she iced him and he's decomposing in the basement," he said wryly.

"You're on the inside; you'd be the one to find out."

"Thanks, Marty, just what I always wanted. Look..." He leaned forward and Castillo's black leather sofa creaked. "I don't think Inez is particularly choosy when it comes to men. Why don't I introduce her to somebody in the department and he can take it from there?"

"You're making headway."

"You call this headway? Drinking Dom P and talking about art? I'm nowhere."

"You've been nowhere before and pulled it out."

"That's when I worked for Vice."

"Do you want a badge?"

He looked up. "Even you can't do that."

In answer, Martin opened the top drawer of his desk and withdrew two black wallets. "The people who threatened you are out of the picture."

"So we can come back."

"If you want."

He eyed the black leather, knowing his badge and ID were inside. It would be so easy to pick it up, put it in his pocket, strap on a shoulder holster...

"No." He shook his head. "Not now."

Martin didn't press; he knew Crockett still wasn't over all that had happened.

"Truth, Marty. You don't have anybody in the wings, do you? I'm it."

"Yes."

"What do you want me to do? Wait till the mister comes home and try to get on his good side? Do you think Inez is feeling me out to see if I might be a good operative?"

"It's possible."

"Like it was with Oscar Carrera?" He almost bit his tongue. No, he still wasn't over the two months of amnesia and law-breaking. He wasn't ready to pick up a badge and gun. Not yet.

Martin understood. He probably understood more than anybody, including Tubbs. "She said she was powerful. Maybe she runs the operation."

It was Sonny's turn to say, "It's possible."

"Find out."

He thought of what he'd said to Rico the previous night as he dressed: "It's a dirty job, but somebody's gotta do it."

* * *

"Dance with me."

Nestor Torres' flute was barely audible on the other side of the open glass doors. The pool lights were on, almost making the water glow. Across Biscayne Bay lay Miami, the skyline not visible from where they stood.

Sonny wanted to tell her he didn't dance, but that wasn't an option now. It didn't matter what Crockett did or didn't do; Burnett danced when the lady wanted. And the lady wanted. She fit comfortably in his arms, cheek to cheek, her breath warm on his neck.

"When will Roberto be back?" He refrained from calling him "your husband"; no sense reminding her she was married. He would do what was necessary to gather evidence against both of them. The condoms in his wallet attested to that.

"Soon." She snuggled against him. "Perhaps by the weekend."

Four days. So much for a body in the basement.

* * *

"Damn it, Rico, I'm not getting anywhere."

"Coulda fooled me, partner." He fingered the collar of the shirt Crockett had tossed over the back of a chair. "What color is that, romantic Rose or Sensual Scarlet?"

Crockett balled the lipstick-stained shirt and threw it across the room. "I've lost it."

"Lost what?"

"My touch."

"Not from where I'm standing. It looks like you've still got it." He smiled at his partner's scowl. "You hate the waiting. And you forgot how much down time there is while we put a case together. Remember Jimmy the Geek?" He watched Sonny's lips twitch, then curve into a smile. "Two months of twiddling our thumbs before anything broke. Patience, man, patience."

"You're right." His voice was a raspy growl. "God, I'm tired. I haven't seen the light of day in over a week."

"I can tell; your tan is fading."

A worried look crossed his face, then he shrugged. "I wish that was the least of my worries."

"Give it time."

"We might not *have* time." He began pacing like a caged lion. "These are the bad guys, Rico. They're dumping drugs on the street that are killing kids every day. The longer I take, the more people die. They've already killed two of Marty's people, for God's sake. How many more have to die while I'm drinking champagne and dancing around the pool?"

"See what happens when Roberto comes back."

"From where?" he challenged. "What the hell kind of job are we doing when a major dealer can slip in and out of town without anybody knowing?"

"We're not the only ones on the case." He wondered how long Crockett could handle the stress. Was he fully recovered from being a "bad guy" himself? Rico was reluctant to ask if he'd kept seeing psychiatrists after they'd left Vice.

"We might as well be. I'm the only one on the inside."

"Then use it, Crockett," he snapped, hoping a harsh tone would bring back the old Sonny who was professional enough to set personal problems aside and concentrate on the job. "Get as close as you can and find whatever it's gonna take to put them out of business."

The pacing ceased and Crockett looked at his reflection in the mirror over

the dresser. "Am I too old for this?" he asked quietly.

"Just out of practice," Rico assured him.

"I don't know..."

"You can do it."

"What if..."

"Don't, man. You've done it before, you can do it now. You just need a little time to get back into the job. Roberto being out of town is giving it to you. So play footsie with the lady and see what you can find out."

He looked at Rico's reflection. "Be honest with me, Rico."

"If I didn't think you could do the job, I'd say so."

Sonny turned and looked into Rico's eyes. He looked relieved. "Thanks."

"Now get some sleep."

* * *

Another night with Inez, but not under the stars. A Miami thunderstorm had swept in as Crockett turned off the Julia Tuttle Causeway. Miami thunderstorms could last five minutes or five days, knocking out power, flooding roadways, and wreaking all kinds of havoc. This was a biggie, thunder shaking the ground, lightning turning the night sky into day, water sheeting from the heavens to soak Sonny in the ten paces from the car to Inez' front door.

"You can't stay like that, you'll catch your death. Come upstairs and we'll find something for you to wear."

Sonny followed her up the staircase, dripping all the way. This being South Florida, at sea level, there were no basements. He wondered if he'd find Roberto's decomposing body in one of the bedrooms.

"What horrible weather."

"It's the tropics," he explained. "And you're on the water. That magnifies the thunder."

"Roberto should have something you can wear."

"I should say I don't want to borrow your husband's clothes."

"Like you borrow his wife?" She opened a door and led him into a bedroom.

"Is that what I'm doing?"

She ignored the question. "I'd like to see you in something casual, but I don't think he has anything..." She poked through a walk-in closet the size of his suite at the hotel. "Take off those wet things."

He didn't know where to strip. Any other evening, he would probably have undressed where he was, within view, but tonight was different. Her comments had stung, her attitude was colder than the raindrops dripping from his hair to run down his neck. He headed for the bathroom.

"Where are you going?" She caught up with him in the bedroom.

"For a towel."

There was an explosion as thunder boomed directly overhead and lightning struck nearby. The lights went out, plunging the room into darkness.

"Don't move, you'll kill yourself on the furniture. I'll get a towel." Her tone had softened and Sonny wondered if she was having second thoughts about having him visit. Maybe Roberto had called and they'd argued; perhaps he'd heard about the blond gringo visiting his wife.

He slipped out of his jacket and reached out for the dressing table chair he'd seen before everything went black. The shoes were next. He jumped when something touched his shoulder.

"Sit down and let me dry your hair." Inez had come up beside him without making a sound. When he reached for the chair again, she pushed him back. "On the bed."

"My pants are wet."

"Take them off."

"Now, lady, I think we need to lay ground rules here." Reaching out, he slid a hand around her waist and pulled her against him. "Your husband isn't home, we're

alone in the bedroom, and you want me to take my pants off. What's a man to think?"

Her voice was low and throaty. "That the lady finds him attractive."

"Is that all?"

There was a beat, then she was pressed against him, arms around his neck, mouth to mouth, her tongue seeking his. He responded, like he knew he would, hoping he was doing the right thing. He let her unfasten his linen trousers, and unzipped her dress. Clothes slid to the floor with barely a rustle and soon he was on the bed, but not worried about getting it wet with rain-soaked clothes.

"Sonny..." She pushed him down, the sparse light glinting off her skin. He reached up and fondled her breasts. "Sonny..."

"Just a second, darlin'." He barely had time to reach for his protection before she mounted him.

She was a skillful lover, rocking him to climax. When he came, she leaned down and kissed his mouth briefly. He held her to him, feeling her climax beginning. She moaned and bit his throat in her ecstacy. He gritted his teeth at the piercing pain.

* * *

"That's one hell of a hickey," he commented later as they sipped champagne and lay side by side in the big bed. "It feels like you broke skin."

"I'm an excitable woman, Sonny. And you excite me."

That pleased him when he thought of her as a woman, but when he thought of her as a dealer's wife it gave him a different feeling.

"Where do we go from here?" He poured more champagne for each of them.

"Wherever we want."

"I mean after your husband comes home."

"What makes you think he would make a difference?"

"He *is* your husband."

"Ours is a marriage of convenience. There is no love lost between us."

"Why did you marry him? You must've loved him once." Sonny Burnett wouldn't have asked these questions; he would've taken whatever stolen moments he could get. But Sonny Burnett wasn't in charge here, Sonny Crockett was, and he had a job to do.

"We have things in common that keep us together."

"Such as?" He ran a fingertip from her chin to her navel, slowly.

"Things you wouldn't understand."

"Business?"

Her chuckle was brief. "No."

"Pleasure?"

"Not that, either."

"Then what?" He leaned close and ran his tongue along her cheek. "Why do you stay with him?"

"Do you want to take me away from all this?" Her arm lifted in a gesture meant to mean the opulence of the house. "What could you offer in exchange?"

"Depends on what you want."

"I want you." She set her glass on the night table, put his beside it, and pulled him to her again. She whispered hotly in his ear, "I want you, Sonny Burnett."

* * *

"Maybe Roberto's gay," Rico suggested when Crockett got back to the hotel in the early morning hours.

"And what they have in common is men?" He shook his head. "I am *not* going that far, even for the job." He yawned. "Close the drapes, will you? My eyes feel like somebody put steel wool under the lids."

"I'll see Castillo today. You get some sleep. You've been burning the candle at both ends since this case started. Take a day off."

"I need a night off." He crawled into bed. "Well, I've crossed one line. I wonder how far I'll have to go to break this case."

"The husband's due back in a couple of days. Just be sure you're not in the line of fire when he finds out what you've been doing with his wife."

"What she's been doing to me you mean." He fingered his neck. "She bit the hell out of me."

"Let me take a look."

He waved Rico away. "The heat of passion. I had one woman used to pull my hair. If we hadn't broken up I'd be sucking lollipops and asking 'Who loves ya?'"

Rico smiled. "You gonna be okay?"

"I'll be fine. Just need some sleep." He heard Rico start to tell him something about a DEA file, his mind drifted, and the next thing he knew Rico was shaking him awake.

"Come on, Romeo, don't want to keep the lady waiting."

"What time is it? I just got to bed."

"It's half-past seven; you slept twelve hours straight."

Sitting up, he ran a hand through his hair. "No way."

"Way," he smiled. "I figured you'd want to shower and shave before you went." He saw Crockett's expression. "Yeah, I noticed you shave now."

"You sure I slept?" He slid out of bed, still groggy.

"You were asleep when I left to see Castillo, you were asleep when I got back, and you slept hours after that. Twelve, partner, count 'em."

He glanced at his watch, wondering if it were A.M. instead of P.M. and Rico was pulling his leg. When he looked out the window, however, he saw that the sun was nearing the western horizon, lighting the sky peach, pink and blue. Evening all right. He padded to the bathroom.

"Damn."

"What?" Rico peeked in the open door.

"Look what she did." He turned his head to one side to display a bruise on his neck.

"Passionate lady." He grinned. "Ain't it nice to know you still attract the ladies?"

* * *

He wasn't so sure when Inez sank her teeth in a second time. He pulled away.

"Don't," she warned quietly. "Lie still."

"You're biting the hell out of me," he complained and tried to move away, but she was too strong. "What the hell..."

"Lie still, Sonny."

There was nothing else he could do. He stared at the ceiling, waiting for the pain in his throat to stop. At last, with a satisfied sound, Inez lifted her head. Her lips brushed his ear.

"I can give you power, Sonny."

Play along, he thought. *Play along and crack this case, then you can leave this loony tune with a neck-biting fetish behind.*

"I can give you wealth beyond your wildest dreams."

Wait. Let her do the talking. Let her make the offer. You don't want to lose the case if she yells entrapment.

"I can make you invincible."

"Nobody's that good," he said lightly.

Her laugh was like the purr of a cat. "I am." She sat up, straddling him.

"You're good at a lot of things." He rested his hands on her thighs. He tried to penetrate the darkness to read her expression. "But nobody's invincible. There's always somebody with a score to settle; somebody who might be just that much more powerful."

"Power isn't everything, Sonny."

"Granted. Power without intelligence..."

"That's not what I mean," she interrupted.

"Why don't we take a shower?" he asked, his body suddenly very warm. Too much champagne, he decided, and too much sleep all day. Evidently he was coming down with a cold from getting caught in the rain, or his body was reacting to staying up all night and sleeping all day. It had been a long time since all-night stake-outs.

"You need to lie still for a while."

Something in her voice made him reach up to touch his throat. His fingers touched something warm, wet and sticky. He sniffed. Blood.

"What the hell did you do?" Forgetting the assignment, he sat up, knocking her aside, and stumbled to the bathroom in the darkness, banging his leg on the night table.

She didn't follow. He turned on the light and looked over the sink, surprised to find that there was no mirror but a framed pen and ink drawing of what looked like a man and woman from about the Civil War era. He scanned all four walls. No mirror.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and went back to the bedroom, hitting the light switch on his way. Two windows, one bed, a chest of drawers, a dresser, two night tables with lamps, one dressing table with chair. No mirror. On the dressing table were perfume bottles, a box of tissues, hairbrush and lipstick. No mirror.

"Power, Sonny." She slithered out of bed, her body white in the glaring light. "And invincibility."

Her strength surprised him when she put her arms around him and put her mouth to his throat again. He couldn't push her away, and that surprised him. She was tall but willowy, thin, almost frail.

"Stop."

His neck hurt--almost burned--and he was hot and dizzy, then cold and breathless. The room spun and he sank to his knees.

* * *

He awoke with a start, for a moment not knowing where he was. The room was vaguely familiar. He lay still and tried to remember where he was and what had happened. All that came to mind was one hell of a weird dream about Inez.

Little by little, memories trickled in. He'd left the hotel and gone to Inez's. Neither of them had been hungry--she barely ate anyway--so they'd skipped dinner, played billiards in the game room, then talked about this and that--she steered clear of discussing any of Roberto's business dealings--and finally retired to the bedroom. After that his memories turned to dreams and he wasn't sure what they'd done. Too damn much champagne on an empty stomach, he decided.

He turned on his side and found Inez lying beside him.

"You're awake."

"Sorry. I must've been worn out."

In the half-light of approaching dawn, she smiled. "You had a tiring night."

That wasn't the half of it, but he didn't want to tell her about the dream. If it was a dream. Gingerly, he touched his neck. It felt like a mosquito had enjoyed dinner on Sonny Crockett. Didn't itch yet, but there wasn't the wet, sticky flow he'd felt in his dream.

Inez put her hand over his. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Did I hurt you?"

Maybe it wasn't a dream.

"Do you want power, Sonny?"

"I have power."

"Not nearly as much as you can. And do you want wealth?"

"Whoever says he doesn't is a liar."

"You can have both if you want."

"And invincibility?"
"That, too."
"What else?" He touched her cheek.
"Not me, Sonny. Never me. I belong to no one."
"Roberto?"
"No one," she repeated.
"That's all I get then? Wealth, power and invincibility?"
"Isn't that enough?"
"What does it cost?"
"Loyalty."
"Just what are we talking about here? Dealing Roberto out of something?"
"He's drawing too much attention. He's too ambitious. He's become a rogue."
Mistaking her meaning, he thought of Roberto openly flirting with every woman at the dinner party. "Why don't you just divorce him?"
Her smile was wry. "It isn't as simple as that. He'll always be there."
"There are ways to make him go away." He had a sudden flashback to Callie and Charlie Bassett. Did Inez, like Callie, sucker the players in and let her husband dispose of them? No, Inez wasn't like Callie. At least he told himself that to assuage the guilt of having slept with her. He'd read Callie's motives early on and hadn't been sucked in.
"Even if he goes away, he'll always be there."
He didn't understand and changed his inflection. "There are ways to make him go away."
"Yes, there are, but I'd hate to resort to such tactics."
"Just what are talking here? What kind of wealth and power are you offering? I was under the impression Roberto was the head honcho."
"He's the visible honcho," she said. "There are others like us who don't crave the spotlight like he does."
"Power puts you in the spotlight. Look at Donald Trump."
"Look at Howard Hughes," she countered. "His name was famous, but no one actually saw him for years. You can have power and anonymity."
"What kind of power and where does the wealth come from?"
"You aren't a stupid man, Sonny. You know what we're involved in." Skirting the issue, not admitting anything directly. Inadmissible in court.
"What kind of loyalty do you expect?"
"Undying loyalty. Companionship. Using your expertise behind the scenes to keep the wealth we now have and add to it for future security."
"What makes you think I'm the right man for that?"
"Experience, Sonny. I can read people. You're exactly what I need." Her hand caressed his cheek. "You're so refreshing." She touched his throat. "Delicious."
"What would a man have to do if he wanted to take you up on your offer?"
"Surrender."
He cocked an eyebrow.
"Give up the life he knows now. Change his life completely."
"Sounds easy enough."
"Take on a new identity and become a new person."
"Do you have any idea how many people would kill for that opportunity?"
"When it comes down to the wire, you'd be surprised how many change their minds."
"Sounds like you've asked other men the same question."
"If they hadn't disappointed me, I wouldn't be asking you now."
"What do you want me to say?"
"No. What do *you* want to say? This is a life-changing question, Sonny. Think about it seriously before you decide."
He tried to think of a snappy come-back, but he was too tired. Maybe he *was* getting too old for this kind of work. Sleep was creeping up on him. Better ask The Question before he drifted off again.
"Are you asking me to kill him?"

She chuckled. "That would be harder than you think. No, I'm asking if you want to replace him."

"Now that's food for thought."

"Then think about it." She got up to close the heavy drapes, plunging the room into darkness. "Rest now and we'll talk more about it tonight."

He was too tired to argue. Rico would have to understand that being under sometimes meant you couldn't check in. He was too damn tired to even make a phone call. Let the surveillance teams tell Tubbs and Castillo that he was spending the day with the lady.

* * *

Tubbs did understand, but it didn't ease his mind any when he met with Castillo later that same afternoon. He was too keyed up to sit, and stood in front of the desk, glaring at the seated lieutenant.

"You should've told us this before we took the case. You said two people were killed..."

Martin corrected him. "I said I'd lost two good people."

"What happened to them?"

"It's in the file." He indicated the folder on his desk.

"No, you tell me."

It was short, but not sweet. The detectives who had filled the vacancies left by Crockett and Tubbs had gone on assignment to build a case against Roberto Cervantes and anyone associated with him. They'd infiltrated the fringes of the operation and were making headway when they disappeared. Marty and the rest of the team had arrived at the site of the deal and set up for the arrest.

"Cervantes showed as scheduled."

"But your people didn't."

The lieutenant shook his head. "No. No one's seen them since."

"Maybe Cervantes made them for cops and killed them. If he blew their cover, he's got to figure you've got back-up waiting. If he doesn't show, you have a prime suspect in the disappearance of two cops. By showing, he blows smoke in your face."

"He was under surveillance all day. He wasn't anywhere near them. They checked in an hour before the meet. That was the last we heard."

"Cervantes could've hired somebody to whack them."

"We haven't found evidence of that."

"One of his enemies, then. Who's his competition?"

"His main competition is a man named La Rouche."

"New? I never heard of him."

"New to Miami. Haitian."

"Anybody from the Ton Ton Macoute in his organization? Anybody in the secret police from any country would be bad news."

"No. He was under surveillance by the DEA, and his movements were accounted for, too."

"So where did they go? Two cops just don't vanish in a puff of smoke. Somebody has to know something. Somebody saw something. What about La Rouche's people? What are they like if they're not ex-secret police?"

"He's heavily into Voodoo..."

"Oh, great," Rico interrupted. "Legba all over again." He didn't want to remember trying to infiltrate a Voodoo dealer's operation and being injected with drugs that had him acting weird for weeks.

"He's disappeared."

"What?" He looked up.

"La Rouche disappeared two days after I lost my people."

"Looks pretty cut and dried to me, then. Two cops getting close, the spooky competition... Who else?"

"No one close to the operation."

"Anybody *not* close to the operation?" He hit the desk top with the flat of

his hand. "Lieutenant, this is like pulling teeth. Why don't you give me the whole story and we can take it from there?"

"You have the whole story."

"Like hell I do. We didn't know your men were missing when we went into this. And we didn't know about La Rouche. What else don't we know? My partner's in Cervantes' house right now. What if he doesn't come back? Just because Cervantes isn't home doesn't mean Sonny's safe."

"That's all there is: two detectives and La Rouche are missing. Outside the case, we've had the usual missing persons, but no one involved with Cervantes, La Rouche or either of the detectives."

"Where are La Rouche's people?"

"In Miami, but not doing more than trying to find their boss."

"That could mean major trouble if they decide to start a war."

"I don't think they will. They're using Voodoo rituals to try to find him. Our trouble will come when they find out where he is and who took him."

"I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when that happens." He rubbed the bridge of his nose to keep the impending headache away. "If I don't hear from Crockett by nine tonight, I'm going in after him. I don't give a damn if it blows your operation. We took this assignment on good faith and you didn't tell us everything we should've known."

"Downtown wanted to start with a clean slate."

"Clean slate my ass!" he said hotly. "Three people missing and my partner's head on a silver platter. Nine o'clock tonight. Count on it."

* * *

It was too dark to read the face of his watch. The closed drapes made it black as pitch; it could've been midnight or noon for all he knew. Tubbs was probably worried sick, and back-up storming the house looking for him would blow the case sky high. Everybody was keyed up about this one.

Inez was sleeping peacefully, her back to him. He slid out of bed and felt his way to the door. He had to get to a phone and call in. When he opened the door to the hall, enough light spilled in for him to find his slacks.

The lights were on in the hall. He blinked at the brightness. It was difficult putting on his slacks. He felt weak and a little dizzy. It was either a mondo hangover or he was, indeed, coming down with something after getting caught in the rain. Wouldn't it be just dandy if the case was blown because he caught the flu.

First things first. Find a phone, call Tubbs or Marty, then find something to eat. Whatever was making him feel so lousy would dissipate if he ate something.

He padded barefoot down the stairs. Glancing at his watch, he noted the time. Just before sundown. One full day shot to hell.

In the living room, he stumbled into a chair before realizing Inez had rolled the hurricane shutters down over the windows, shutting out the light. The switch was on the far wall. He turned on a table lamp so he wouldn't bark his shins on anything else. The shutters rolled slowly into their casings above the window.

The phone was on a table near the hall door. He went to it and dialed the hotel number.

"Hello?"

"Tubbs, it's me."

"Where the hell have you been?"

"In bed with the lady."

"Well, I've got news for you, partner. I think you should get out of there so we can talk."

"I can't right now."

"Just tell the lady something came up."

Sonny was about to answer when a wave of nausea and pain swept over him. It was instant fever, as though his blood was boiling in his veins. He doubled over

with a moan and slid to the floor behind the wing chair.

"Sonny?" Rico sounded anxious. "Sonny, are you there?"

It was cooler on the floor, the chair shielding him from the sunlight spilling in through the windows, the air conditioning vent wafting cool air over him. He wiped sweat from his face and took a deep breath.

"Yeah."

"It doesn't sound like that from where I am. Get your butt back here now. You could be in real trouble over there."

"It's just me and the lady, Rico. I'm okay."

"I've heard that before," he said sourly. "No heroes. Either you get out of there now or I'm coming to get you."

"I'm okay, really. Just a little drained." He did feel better, though not much. "I think I'm catching a cold. Got caught in the rain."

"Health aside, partner, there's more here you need to know. Like what happened to Marty's two friends." He had to be careful what he said; no telling who might have the line tapped.

"I can't leave now, the lady's still in bed. That wouldn't be polite." He wanted Rico to understand that he was not in mortal danger. "I'll spend the evening with her and leave when she goes back to bed."

"If you ask me, she keeps the weirdest hours of any of your women. You're true to form, Sonny. You always had the worst luck with women."

"There's a difference here. I'm not falling for this one. This is a job, plain and simple."

"It's not plain, and it sure as hell isn't simple."

Sonny heard a noise from upstairs. "Gotta go."

"Just stay cool, man. I want you back here in one piece."

"No sweat." He hung up and realized just how much he was sweating. Damn flu bug.

Food. First thing on the agenda was getting something in his stomach. It would look less suspicious if he were in the kitchen making breakfast--if that's what he could call it--for Inez. She might take it as a romantic gesture.

The glass bricks of the kitchen wall diffused the sunlight, but not enough to see to cook. He turned on the light to see what he was doing. The refrigerator yielded eggs, bread, butter, a few strips of bacon, and tomato juice. Laying the bacon on paper towels, he put it in the microwave and set the timer, then broke the eggs into a bowl and started mixing. A nice fluffy omelet might be more to the lady's taste than plain old scrambled eggs. His usually turned out burned with broken yolks--he never had gotten the hang of making them sunny side up.

He poured a glass of tomato juice while he worked and took a sip. Almost immediately his stomach rejected it. He retched, putting the bowl down and leaning over the sink. Nothing came up, but there wasn't much down there to begin with.

The nausea passed. He ran cold water over his face and was deciding the juice was too acidic when the microwave beeped. He opened the door and the smell of fresh cooked bacon assailed him. It was worse than the juice, and he tore back to the sink, retching.

"Oh, poor dear." Inez came up beside him and wiped his face with a wet paper towel. He was too nauseous to be embarrassed. "What are you doing?"

Swallowing hard, he leaned against the sink and took a deep breath. "Trying to fix breakfast." He cleared his throat. "Guess I caught a bug when I got rained on."

She caught his hand when he reached for the tomato juice. "That's not what you need." It went down the drain. "Come, I'll give you what you need."

When she started leading him to the door, he protested. "I need to eat."

"I know." But she didn't let go.

"My stomach's empty."

"I know." She was strong and he was too weak to argue, so there was no sense protesting. He let her take him out beside the pool. "You'll feel much better in a few minutes. Take a deep breath."

He did, but it didn't make much different. He still felt like he'd been rode hard and put up wet.

"Come on," she coaxed. "Another one. Breathe deeply."

It made him a tad less nauseous, but he was still weak. He stood barefoot on the close-clipped grass, watching the sky darken. Little by little his strength began to return and he felt more like a human being again.

"That's better." Inez stepped back and let him stand on his own.

"I'm hungry." All he wanted to do was get back to the kitchen and eat.

"I'll feed you, Sonny," she said softly. When she didn't move, he wondered what she intended to do, levitate the food out to them or make it miraculously appear.

Night had turned the sky a dark blue. The security lights came on automatically, throwing weird shadows across Inez's face. Her face looked momentarily like a gargoyle, something from the cathedral where the Hunchback haunted the bell tower. Then she stepped toward him and her features were soft and beautiful once again.

"Did you consider what I asked you last night?"

His mind was blank. What had she asked?

"Do you want a new life? Do you want power and wealth?"

Do I want to finish this damn case and go home? he asked himself. Most of all, he wanted something to eat.

"Yes," he said briefly, not wanting to prolong the conversation.

"Do you truly want it?"

"Yes. More than anything." Which was true, as far as he was concerned. Once he'd eaten, he could beg off and go back to the hotel.

The corners of her mouth curled up and she took another step. There was no more than a breath of air between them. "I'm glad, Sonny."

So am I. Now can I eat?

Her hand went to her throat. He couldn't see very clearly, but when her hand moved away, there was something on her neck. He leaned closer for a look and her fingers wove through his hair, pulling him down. When his lips touched her throat, he tasted blood and tried to pull away, but she was stronger than she looked and held him fast. He tried to turn his head to the side, but that, too, was impossible. When he opened his mouth to speak, his tongue slid in the sticky liquid. At first it made him retch and he was afraid he'd vomit all over her. Then, when he couldn't help himself, he swallowed.

It was as if he could feel the blood slide down his throat and into his stomach. As soon as it did, he found that he was no longer hungry. He swallowed again and, again, followed the course down to his stomach. The hunger was gone. Then his will was gone, and he was sucking and licking and swallowing her blood.

"Enough," she said after a while and pushed him away.

He looked at her, dumfounded. What had he done? There was a smear of blood on her throat, and he felt a drop run off his chin onto his naked chest. With a smile, Inez licked it off.

He wanted to ask what the hell she'd done to him, why he was drinking blood, but the reactions of his body kept him mute. Not only was he feeling stronger and healthier, he felt wonderful. More wonderful than he had in a long time. Youthful. He felt as if he could do anything.

Then he realized his senses were more acute. He could hear thunder, then realized it wasn't thunder but the beating of his own heart. No, two hearts. His and hers. His night vision was sharper. He could make out a Scarab out on the Bay, even read the registration number on its side.

"It will be even better," she promised. "This is just the beginning."

* * *

There was a light rap at the door and Rico opened it to find Martin Castillo in the hall.

"Come on in. He called and I'm not going."

"How is he?"

"Says he might've caught the flu, but he's okay. Going to spend time with Inez, then come back here."

"I couldn't tell you everything because I was under orders. I gave you as much as I could. I didn't think things would happen this quickly."

"We're going to have to talk this over. He might not want to go on after he hears what's been going down."

Martin nodded.

"If he doesn't get back by dawn, I'm going after him."

"Talk to Switek first. He has the house under surveillance." He called Metro and had them patch him through to Stan, then put Tubbs on the line.

"This night scope is great," Stan told him. "I can see just about everything."

"How's Sonny?"

"Same as always, a real lady killer."

"Who else is there?"

"All I've seen is him and the missus."

"You're sure he's all right?"

"Couldn't be better, although she'll have one heck of a hickey to cover up. They're out by the pool, making out to beat the band."

When he hung up, Rico gave Martin a look of apology. "He's okay. Just being Sonny."

* * *

"What do you think I am?" Inez answered his question with a question.

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking." His emotions were in turmoil. He was angry, but didn't know whether at her or himself. First and foremost, however, he was disgusted, and that totally at himself. Doing what he'd done--sleeping with the enemy--could be explained away as part of the job. Lord knew he'd done it before. Using condoms didn't make it totally safe, but took the edge off. There was absolutely no excuse--no reason--no explanation--to expose himself to AIDS or any other disease by drinking her blood, to say nothing of having done something so revolting.

"You drugged the champagne, didn't you?" he accused. He wanted to shake her when she didn't answer fast enough. "Didn't you?" he shouted.

"There was no need," she said softly.

His mouth tasted of blood. Not as distasteful as he would have imagined, not physically anyway. It was the idea that sickened him.

"God." He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. It came away bloody. "You're sick. I don't know what you *think* you are, but I can tell you, you're one hell of a sick lady. I'm outta here. This wasn't part of the deal."

Her voice caught him as he reached the door. "What did you think I meant?"

He ignored her and kept going. All he wanted was to get his clothes and leave.

She followed, still talking calmly. "I offered you not only wealth and power, but invincibility."

Half-way up the stairs, he stopped, turned and glowered at her. "Not cannibalism."

She chuckled. "Is that what you think this is?"

"Whatever it is, lady, I don't want any part of it."

"You can't leave."

"The hell I can't."

"It's too late. The transformation has already started."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, but I've had enough." He stalked up the stairs. She was still at the foot when he came out, carrying the rest of his clothes. "Don't try to stop me."

"I have no intention of it. You'll be back."

"I'm glad you think so." Brushing past her, he opened the front door. She stood in the doorway as he fumbled with his car keys.

"I'll be waiting, Sonny."

"Not likely."

"You will."

"Does the term 'when hell freezes over' mean anything to you?"

Her smile followed him out the driveway.

* * *

Marty and Rico filled him in on the missing detectives and dealer, but Sonny's mind was on Inez and what had happened beside the pool. In his state of mind, he didn't care about any missing dealers, and if a detective couldn't fend for himself, then he didn't deserve his badge. Callous, he knew, but he had his own worries. For one, how soon could he go for an AIDS test, and how accurate were they?

"You want something to eat?" Rico asked.

"Not hungry." The thought of trying to put something in his stomach revolted him. What he wanted was to wring Inez Cervantes' neck.

For the rest of the night, Martin and Rico talked, Sonny paced, and the final decision was that Crockett would stay on the case until they could introduce another player. If Rico and Marty were puzzled about his vehement desire to get off the case, neither mentioned it. His decision was to tell Inez he was too sick to visit and stay away till Roberto got back and deal with him and only him.

Marty looked at his watch. "Switek will be relieved soon. I'll get his report on what she did after you left."

Sonny scowled, his head beginning to throb. "I don't give a damn what she did."

Rico had an idea. "Why don't we plant a bug? Then we can listen in on everything."

With thoughts of what he'd been through, Sonny vetoed it. "He might have a sweep. There's too much coincidence going on here, and they're just plain weird."

"Staying up all night might be weird, but..."

Blood fetish came to mind, but he didn't say it. Or had he really drunk her blood? If she had, in fact, drugged his champagne, it might've been one helluva hallucination. No wonder she'd acted so cool and calm when he stormed out.

Marty went to the door. "Get some sleep. We'll discuss this later."

"I'm not tired," he growled, but truth be told, he was getting one banger of a headache that didn't feel like it'd get better any time soon. The flu? Drugs in his drinks? Empty stomach? Maybe a combination of all three, he decided. "Yeah, good-night, Marty. I'll call you later." He went to the bathroom after Castillo left. "God, my head aches. Got an aspirin?"

Rico wordlessly handed him a bottle of Tylenol. It was obvious that Crockett was not feeling well, and the less said the better. Get him to bed, let him sleep, then work things out when he woke up.

Sonny peeled off his clothes, took a shower, rinsed his mouth with antiseptic mouthwash, and crawled into bed. He was sure he wouldn't sleep, but it wasn't long before dawn that he conked out.

And dreamed of an old case when he and Rico had been in a building with a counterfeiter who'd blown their cover and turned on the sprinklers. Only these sprinklers spewed gasoline onto piles and piles of fake currency. Shots were fired, and then somebody had lit a match...

In reality, he and Tubbs had made it out safely, not burning, just smelling like a bad night at a Texaco station. In the dream, flames crawled up his arm. First his jacket burned, then the hairs on his arm singed, then the skin turned red and blistered...

The pain was real. He awoke with a start, sitting up, lifting his arm. A shaft of sunlight had slipped between the heavy hotel drapes, highlighting a spot on his mattress--just where his arm had lain. He looked at his right forearm. The hair from wrist nearly to the elbow was singed, the skin red, though not blistered. It looked as though he'd burned it. Perhaps he had, last night at Inez's, while trying to cook.

There wasn't much in the bathroom, so he called Room Service, yawning an order for bandages and ointment. He was half asleep when it was delivered, and nodded off almost as soon as the arm was wrapped and the drapes closed securely.

When Rico got back, all he found was a note on Sonny's pillow:

"Unfinished business. I'll call you later."

* * *

Inez barely glanced up when Sonny stormed in. "What the hell did you do to me?"

"Nothing you didn't agree to."

"I didn't agree to drink blood. You're sick, lady. You into Voodoo or something?" He remembered that La Rouche was into Voodoo. "I know you and your husband deal drugs, and that's fine by me. I'm willing to make a fast buck, just like the next guy." He had no intention of blowing his cover. "But I'm not getting into any kinky fetishes."

"It isn't a fetish, I assure you."

"Whatever it is, you can keep it to yourself."

"You gave me permission, Sonny, and the transformation has already started."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You're changing."

"The hell I am."

"The hell you are." She smiled. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed." She indicated his arm. "What happened?"

He wondered what she could see under the jacket. "Nothing."

"When was the last time you ate real food?"

He couldn't remember, but wasn't going to admit that to her.

"How did you feel after you fed last night?"

"Fed? Is that what you call it?"

"What would you call it?"

"Sick. Demented. Perverted."

"Necessary."

"Does your husband know what you're into? Do you want me to tell him?"

"Blackmail?" Her eyebrows lifted. "You want me to put in a good word with Roberto, and in return you won't tell him what I've done."

"You got it."

"And if he does know?" Her hand rose to stop him. "I know, you're outta here."

"I've dealt with a lot of people, but you take the cake."

"You can't stop it now, Sonny."

"Stop what?" he asked through clenched teeth. "Stop talking in circles."

"I've started the transformation. I must feed on you one more time, then you must feed on me, and then it will be complete."

"Oh, it's complete now, believe me."

"No," she said sharply enough to stop him at the door. "You couldn't stay away tonight, could you?"

"I wanted to..."

She interrupted, "You didn't want anything. You had to come back. You had no choice."

"Look, lady..."

"No, you look," she said sternly. "This isn't a game. If you walk out that door now, you could die tomorrow."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a promise. The transformation has started and you're in a transitional stage. You're neither what you were nor what you are becoming."

"Speak English."

"All right. You want to know what I am, I'll tell you." She moved too quickly for him to see. One second, she was in the hall, he was at the door, the next second she was at his throat, sucking sounds telling him just what she was doing. He tried to push her away, but his strength ebbed with the flow of his blood. He sank to his knees, then sat on the cool marble, his back against the door, unable to move.

He was dying. He could feel his heartbeat slowing. The muscles of his arms and legs went slack. Whatever else she was, Inez Cervantes was certainly a murderer. The coldness of the marble floor seeped into his body; the coldness of death. He couldn't fight her, couldn't save himself. He always thought he'd die from a bullet, not the lips of a beautiful woman.

There was a slender thread of life left. He lay on the cold floor and stared at the ceiling, his mind barely functioning. It was a matter of seconds now. He hadn't said good-bye to Rico or called Billy one last time. No one knew for certain he was with Inez; he hadn't seen anyone watching the house from the street side. Was this how the others had disappeared? Were they buried somewhere nearby?

He was too near death to feel fear, though he did feel regret and an overwhelming sadness. His life had meant nothing. In the end, he hadn't done his job. He'd failed. There was nothing to do but surrender. His heartbeat almost imperceptible, he closed his eyes, took one last breath...

And drank. Warm, hot, sticky, salty yet sweet. It touched his lips, slid over his tongue, went down his throat. He felt it almost burning through his system. At first too weak to resist, he let it happen. Then, when strength began to return, he realized with horror that he did not want to resist.

"Rest now." Inez moved away from him. He was strong enough to sit up, but barely. "Now you know what I am and what you've become."

Too weak to speak, he stared at her blankly.

"Don't tell me you still don't believe in vampires."

He would've laughed, had he been stronger.

"You'll believe soon enough. You died tonight, Sonny. You've come beyond death, and this is how you will live forever." She went to the foot of the stairs and turned. "Come on. You have to learn to feed yourself."

He didn't want to move.

"You'll have to feed soon."

"Or I'll die?" he croaked.

"You won't die. You'll never die."

"I won't feed either."

"You may not want to feed, but you will. Your body will overrule your mind."

"Go to hell," he growled.

"I suppose that's what many people would call the life I live. Nevertheless, it's time for you to learn to fend for yourself. Come on, your dinner's waiting."

*

Trudy Joplin was on her way out the door when the phone rang. She glanced over her shoulder and saw that Lt. Castillo was deeply engrossed in a file and had, undoubtedly, not heard it.

"OCB, Det. Joplin." She juggled phone, purse and car keys. "Who?...Oh, sure. Hold on." She hit the hold button and went to Martin's office. "Lieutenant, there's a Captain Stonetree on the phone."

With barely a nod of thanks, he lifted the receiver. "Yes."

"Well, thank you, Trudy," she said under her breath and headed for the parking lot.

The conversation was brief, and after he hung up, Martin called Rico to

inform him that outside help was on the way. Fortunately there was someone who had dealt with Cervantes before.

* * *

The climb up the stairs had been sheer torture. Every muscle, every bone, every joint, even the hairs on his head ached. He was beginning to believe he had died, and if he hadn't, he wished he would, just so the pain would go away. Inez led him down the hall to what he had first thought was a closet door. It turned out to be an inside room without windows; probably at one time it had been a closet, though as big as the one in the bedroom.

Inez opened the door and waited for him to catch up to her before turning on the light. He took one look and recoiled. Three men lay on blankets on the floor. Two were young, Caucasian, wearing the remnants of suits. The third was black, probably in his late 50s or early 60s, wearing sweat pants and a t-shirt. They looked almost like corpses, their complexions pasty, lips cracked, eyes wide and staring vacantly at the ceiling. None of them even blinked when the bright overhead light went on.

"Go on." Inez gave Sonny a gentle push. He stumbled and fell to his knees in the center of the room. He smelled the men's sweat and other bodily odors. *"Bon appetit."* With a smile and a wave, she closed the door, locking it from the outside.

He drew his knees up and laid his head against them, trying to focus. His mind--what had he said to Hightower?--was like Swiss cheese. He wasn't nauseous, even with the odors in the room, and the headache was gone, but he was god-awful weak, barely able to stay upright. How easy it would be to lie down, flat on his back, like the other three men.

Who were they? With great effort, he lifted his head and looked at them. The Caucasians seemed to be breathing, though shallowly; the black man, he decided, was dead. On hands and knees, he dragged himself to the nearest man and leaned down close to his ear.

"Who are you?" Throat raw, his voice was a barely audible rasp.

There was no response, not even a blink.

Weak though he was, Crockett was first and foremost a cop. Not much missed his attention. It didn't take long to note that all three men had mottled bruises on their throats and dried blood on their collars. There had to be a reason for their being here, aside from the obvious dinner selection for Inez, and that made him rifle through their pockets in search of identification.

The black man had no i.d., and his worst nightmare came true when he found familiar black leather cases on the other men. He had found Marty's missing detectives.

The exertion of his search left him weaker still, and he leaned against the wall, wondering how long it would be before he was in the same state as the dead black man. Not long if the slowness of his heartbeat meant anything.

His eyes opened with a start when he realized it wasn't his own heartbeat he heard, but those of the two detectives clinging to life. Their blood was barely moving through their veins, and he imagined he could hear it like a once-mighty river now reduced to a trickle. Their breath was shallow; autumn leaves rustling in a breeze. It frightened him.

There was a plastic bowl in the far corner, as though someone had dropped it carelessly, and he wondered if Inez would bring him something to eat. She had, after all, wished him good appetite. She couldn't possibly believe she was a vampire. There were no such things, though there were people with blood fetishes who got their rocks off by drinking human blood. He didn't want to admit how good it had tasted when he'd swallowed it downstairs--if that was what he had swallowed; he only had her word for it.

A look at his watch told him it was hours till midnight, hours more till dawn, when Rico would call in the militia. It would be too late by then. There

would be four corpses in the room by dawn.

Surrender was not familiar to Sonny Crockett, but he was too weak to fight it. Leaning back against the wall, closing his eyes, he rested, willing his strength to come back. There had to be a way out, and it was his responsibility to save himself and the others, if possible. If he could at least make it to a phone and call Marty...

There was a rhythm to the fading heartbeats and shallow breathing. It soothed him somehow and he almost drifted to sleep. His mind replayed scenes with Inez: sipping champagne, dancing, making love, drinking blood. He shook his head to clear it, but it kept coming back: drinking blood, drinking blood. She'd bit his throat--his mind's eye saw the mottled wounds on three throats--she'd drunk his blood. And he had drunk hers. Twice. The hot, sticky, sweet and salty taste had rolled over his tongue and he had savored it like a connoisseur. The thought of it made him recoil.

Pain unlike anything he'd ever experienced tore through him and he cried out, doubling over, grabbing his stomach, rolling on the floor. Hot knives of pain shot through every cell of his body. He hugged himself tighter, trying to hold himself together, trying to stop the agony. His veins were on fire, flaming blood running through them. His lungs burst into flame. Again and again he howled in torment, writhing.

"Your body will overrule your mind." Inez's words came to him, horrifying him, as his body crawled to the closest of the detectives. He willed himself to move away, to crawl to the farthest corner, but his body did not obey. He leaned over the inert man and saw stark terror in the man's eyes. Nothing would stop his body now; not his mind, not his will, nothing. His head lowered toward the throat. His mouth opened. He could hear the heartbeat, hear the flow of blood. His lips brushed the man's throat.

"Noooo" It was cut off as his teeth sank into the man's jugular vein.

* * *

It was dark in the outer office; only Castillo's office was lit by the overheads. Rico felt more comfortable in the semi-darkness, not being able to see the familiar desks where he and Sonny had sat for five long years.

"Why didn't we meet him at Metro?" he asked Martin. "This is an undercover location."

"He's a police officer, and the fewer who know he's here, the better."

"So who is he?" He sat casually on the corner of the desk.

"Knight."

"Nick Knight." The interruption made them both look up. Neither had heard anyone enter the squad room. Martin was momentarily disconcerted; he was not used to people catching him unaware.

The stranger entered, his hand out. He seemed a little uncomfortable himself. Rico slowly shook the hand, giving the man an up-and-down.

He appeared to be in his late 30s, his hair a darker blond than Sonny's, and there was stubble on his chin. He had a stocky build and wore dark slacks, an open-neck shirt, sneakers and a black leather jacket. There was something familiar about him, but Rico couldn't put his finger on it.

Martin shook Knight's hand and went on as though there had been no interruption. "You've dealt with Cervantes."

"Yeah, a few years back." He moved across the room. "Mind if I sit?" He motioned to the black leather couch. When Martin nodded, he sat. "He and Inez have been making connections in various cities. A couple of our undercovers missed a meet and soon after that, Mr. and Mrs. C left town." He had an accent Rico couldn't place, not quite foreign, not quite American either.

"Let me guess." Rico walked toward him. "Cervantes made the meet."

"Our people figured he didn't know the undercovers wouldn't show."

"What do you think?" Martin asked.

"I understand you've had the same situation here." He looked at the lieutenant. "You don't think your people skipped town, do you?"

"I think Cervantes had something to do with it."

Rico glanced at Martin, then looked back at Nick. There was something going on between them that he couldn't fathom.

"No proof, though."

"No."

Knight's eyes went to Rico. "Your partner's on the inside."

"Yes."

"How long?"

"A week. A little less. We went in as Burnett and Cooper."

He considered it briefly. "When did you hear from him last?"

"Early this evening."

"Time?"

"Seven? Eight? I don't remember."

"Before dark?"

Rico tried to remember. "I think so. Just before sundown."

"How did he sound?"

"Tired." He was losing patience with this line of questioning; it wasn't getting them any closer to getting Sonny out. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Maybe nothing, then again..." He let it hang. "How's his health?"

Rico looked at Martin as if to ask, "What's with this guy?" but the stern look on the lieutenant's face told him this might be important. "He was catching a cold. Got caught in the rain."

"How long has he been with them?"

"Not them," Rico corrected. "Her. Roberto left town and Sonny's been spending time with Inez, trying to work his way into her confidence."

Knight's eyes twinkled. "I can imagine." He continued before Rico could comment, "Has he been staying there?"

"No. Goes over in the evening and spends the night." Realizing how that sounded, he explained, "She keeps weird hours."

"I'm sure she does. How is he during the day?"

"Fine."

"Tired? Sleep a lot?"

"Yeah, but he's been up all night. And he's coming down with a cold," he repeated. He stalked back to Martin's desk. "This isn't getting Sonny out of there. Every minute we waste chit-chatting could be a minute off his life."

"What makes you think he's in danger, detective?"

Rico glared at the stranger, trying to figure out what was making him so uncomfortable around him. Then it hit him. "Evan Freed."

"Who?"

"An old friend of Crockett's." He remembered the cop who'd gone over the edge and died in a gun battle. The friendship with Freed was a skeleton from Crockett's closet that caused him a great deal of pain and torment. Rico doubted if he was over it even now, almost ten years after Freed's death. "That's who you look like." And that, he decided, is why I get a bad feeling around you.

Martin brought the conversation back to the situation at hand. "What do you know about Cervantes?"

"I know that time is of the essence. We lost two detectives, you've lost two. Your man Crockett could be in danger."

"What kind of danger?" Rico pressed. "He's alone with Inez."

"Where's Roberto?"

Rico's glance at Martin said more than his words did. "Nobody seems to know. One minute he was there, then he was gone. Inez said he was out of town on business, but nobody saw him go."

"You're sure he's gone?"

"Sonny didn't see him at the house."

"How much surveillance do you have on them?"

"Evidently not enough."

Knight glanced at his watch. "We don't have much time. If we're going to do anything, I'd suggest we do it now."

"And what do you suggest we do? Storm the house? Then let's go."

"No."

"Lieutenant, for all we know, Roberto's in that house and Sonny's cover might be blown. He said it in the beginning, things were happening too conveniently. We no sooner walked in the door than Inez latched onto him. They might've known who we were before we got there."

"And maybe they don't know who he is."

"He's right," Knight conceded. "Barging in could blow your entire case. On the other hand, we're dealing with nocturnal people who operate between sundown and sun-up. If we're going to do anything, it has to be now." He looked at Martin. "Two of us could get inside."

"No," Rico said sharply. "If anybody goes in, I do."

Martin deliberated for about ten seconds. "We'll need back-up."

"Back-up?" Rico asked hotly. "I'm relegated to back-up? He's my partner."

"And he'll need back-up. You're the best I've got."

The compliment was not lost on Rico. "Okay. If we're going to move, let's roll."

Martin rolled his chair back from the desk and stood. "Switek is on the water. Co-ordinate with him and the men watching from the street." He turned to Knight. "You come with me."

"What kind of car do you have?" The question was incongruous, but Martin answered without hesitation.

"Chrysler."

"Two door?"

"Four."

"Good, let's go."

* * *

"Your body will overrule your mind." He heard it again in his head. And again and again and again. The horror of the reality immobilized him. He had crawled into a corner as far from the bodies as he could, curling into a fetal ball, eyes shut tight, a stray tear tracking down his cheek.

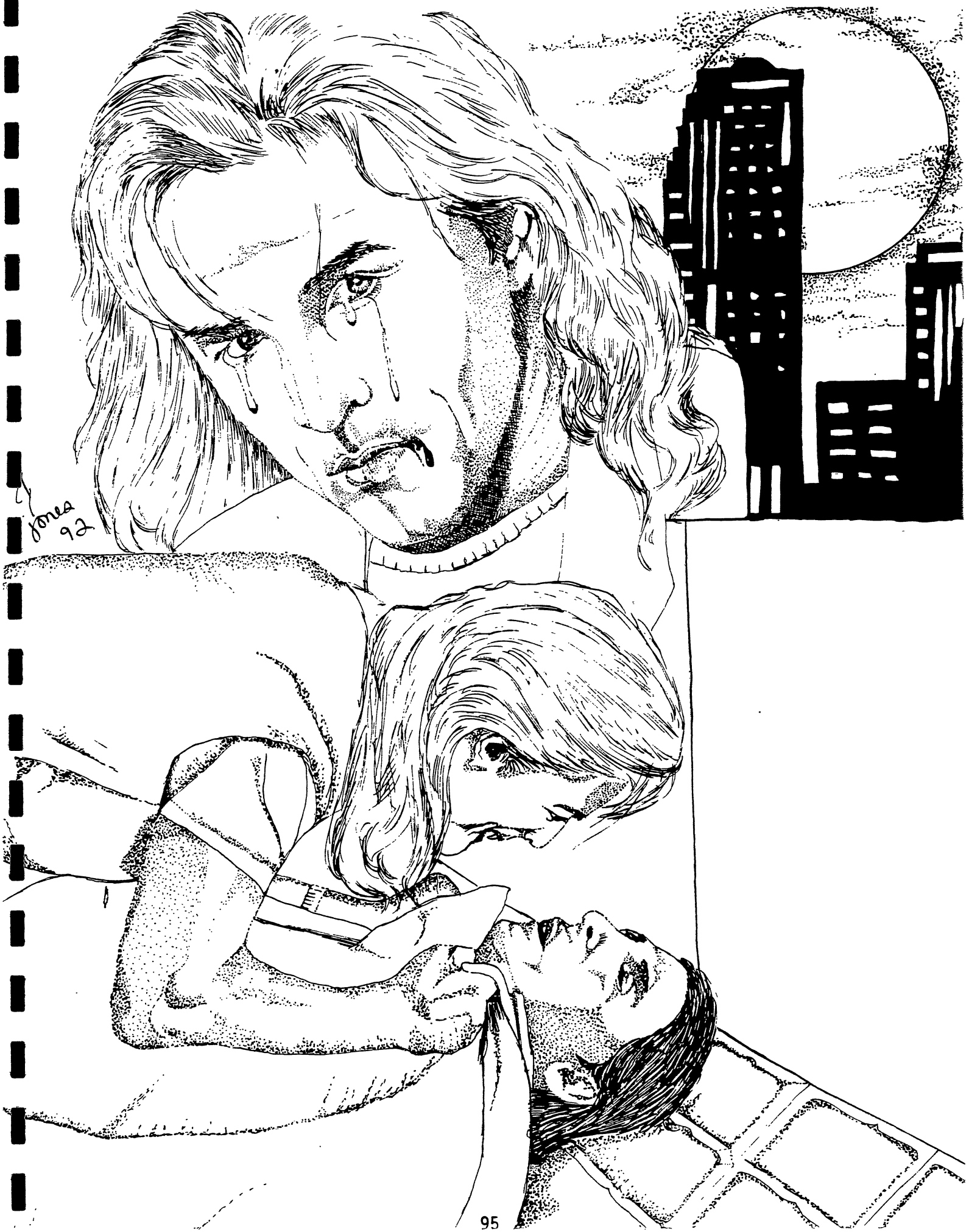
He could still see the look of terror in the detective's eyes just before he'd killed him. It would haunt him forever. He had killed a human, and not just any human, a cop. Two of them, because when he had drunk the first man dry, his body had moved to the second and drained him. His mind and emotions had fought a losing battle against his body.

The heartbeats had called to him, the flow of blood enticed him. As he drank, he could hear the hearts beat slower...slower...slower...and finally stop. There was no flutter. Just beat...pause...beat...pause... Each beat weaker, each pause longer. One second a man was alive, the next he was dead.

"No! No! No!" He banged his fists against the wall, then his head, trying to come back to reality, where women did not drink his blood and he didn't kill brother cops. No matter how hard he beat, nothing changed. He was still in a locked room with three dead men, two of whom he had just murdered in cold blood. No, not cold. Hot. Delicious, tantalizing his taste buds...

He wrenched his mind from thoughts of blood. He had to get out, had to find help. But his body was still too weak. He would have to... No, he couldn't stay. He had killed two men, and from what Inez had said, this was just the beginning. He had to find someone to help him out of her promised hell.

Skirting the bodies, he crawled to the door, grasped the doorknob and tried to pull himself up, but he was still too weak. If what Inez had said was true, the blood should have given him strength. There hadn't been enough. Both men had been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on the verge of death, with just enough blood to keep them alive.

Leaning against the door, he gave in to his emotions and wept, not ashamed at his grief. When his initial sobs slackened, he caught a sound on the other side of the door. He didn't have to press his ear to the door; his sense of hearing had heightened, he realized, when he recognized Roberto's voice and placed him with Inez downstairs in the living room, too far for normal human ears to hear.

"Why did you do it?" Roberto accused angrily.

"We lost Lewis. We had to replace him."

"We," he stressed. "Not you. I know why you chose him."

"We had to replace him sooner or later, and I wanted someone nice to look at."

"That's not all. You know who he is."

"Sonny Burnett." So she didn't know he was Crockett; his cover was intact.

"And do you know anything about this Sonny Burnett?"

"He's a dealer."

"Was a dealer," he pointed out. "He's burned out. He lost it, *querida*."

She was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I've made contacts. I've found out things. He was a middle-man, nothing more, until he began working for a man named Manolo in Ft. Lauderdale. He engineered the downfall of Manolo, moved to Miami and manipulated his way into Oscar Carrera's organization. Via a woman, I might add. Both Oscar Carrera and his son were killed through Burnett's treachery, and El Gato--that degenerate imbecile. He had it all, in the palm of his hand. Where is it now, this wealth? I'll tell you. Confiscated. Every cent of it. Everything. Manolo's, Carrera's, Gato's. Burnett has nothing."

"He has everything now."

"You fool!" It sounded like he slapped her. "He's treacherous. He uses people, kills them when they no longer serve his purpose, and he can't hold on to what he acquires."

"We've got a long time to teach him."

"You don't understand, do you? He *betrayed* Manolo, double-crossed Carrera, and murdered Gato. Do you think we're safe? Do you think anyone is safe around him?"

She chuckled. "Perhaps only the women are safe."

"That's why you did it. You've grown tired of me. He's my replacement." There was a pause but Inez said nothing. Roberto continued. "I remember, *querida*, when you told me the things you must have told him. When will you grow tired of him, and who will his replacement be?"

* * *

Knight glanced at his watch again as Castillo passed Mt. Sinai Medical Center on Alton Road, a few blocks from the Cervantes house.

"There's plenty of time before dawn."

He assessed Martin.

"I met someone like you in the Golden Triangle."

It had been a long time since Nick had met anyone like Martin Castillo. He felt comfortable with him, but wondered just how far he could trust him. He waited for Castillo to continue, to see just how much he knew or suspected, before committing himself.

"If we don't get out before sun-up, the trunk will be adequate."

That told Nick what he needed to know. "You know what they might have done to Crockett."

"I'm hoping they killed him instead."

"He can learn to deal with it." He caught Martin's glance. "I have."

"The house is ahead on the left. I'll drive by, turn and come back."

Nick could see better in the dark than Martin, and scanned the house carefully but saw no signs of habitation. His acute hearing picked up voices. If

they were what he suspected, they could hear him, but the noise of their argument would cover their arrival. He had to consider, however, how Martin, Switek, Tubbs and the other men would handle Roberto and Inez. Normal procedures would not work.

Martin swung around and came back on the same side of the street as the house. He parked in a neighbor's driveway and turned to Nick.

"Is he in there?"

Nick didn't ask how Martin knew about his hearing. "I can't tell. I only hear two voices: Inez and Roberto." Narrowing his eyes, he tuned in to the words.

"I never said I wanted to replace you." A woman's voice.

"Did you tell Rudolfo you wanted me to replace him?" A pause, then the man continued, "I don't care if you cut me out of your personal life. There's been no love lost between us for eighty years. You and Burnett deserve each other. But I warn you, I won't be destroyed like Rudolfo. The business is mine. I took what Rudolfo started and made it what it is today. I will not relinquish control of that to Burnett or to you. If you want power and wealth, you'll have to build your own. I'll give him a start, but I won't give it all. Let him build like he did with Manolo and the others, but you'll have to teach him how to hold onto it."

Nick looked at Martin. "Dissension in the ranks. I think we're too late to save Crockett. Inez probably already turned him. Roberto just realized his head's on the chopping block. She may try to kill him tonight."

"What about Crockett?"

"What kind of man is he? I need to know, because what we find in there isn't going to be quite the same man who went in. He'll have some of Crockett's qualities, but what he's gone through can bring out the cruelty in a man. He may or may not feel the same about you."

Martin did his best to give a capsulized description of a complex man.

"His period of amnesia was nothing compared to what he's going through now. At least he came out of that a human being." He glanced toward the house, then back to Martin. "You know what I am."

"Yes, I met vampires in the Golden Triangle."

"Then you know we don't have much time, and we've got to get him out of there."

"That will be difficult."

"No, the difficult part will be taking care of Inez and Roberto. They'll both be strong, and they can hear me as well as I can hear them, so if they're listening, they already know we're here. They have surprise on their side, because your people will expect them to act human. I may be strong, but there are two of them and one of me, and we'll have Crockett to deal with, too."

"Lieutenant?" A disembodied voice filled the car.

Martin lifted the two-way radio. "Yes."

"We're in place."

He looked at Nick. "How can we destroy them?"

* * *

All Sonny could think about was blood. It was an addiction now, worse than any he'd ever encountered. There was a craving in his gut that burned, and the only thing that would satisfy the craving and stop the pain was blood. Fresh, hot, human blood.

There were three bodies on the floor, but not a drop of blood between them. Two people came into the room, but their blood was not what he needed. He had to get away, outside, where there was blood in plenty. He could almost smell it.

The man--he vaguely recognized him--began bundling up the bodies, stacking them near the door like firewood. The woman came to Sonny and spoke in hushed tones, but he was only half listening; all he wanted was blood.

"I made you. I'm your mistress. You must do what I tell you."

He had to do what his body told him, and that was go in search of blood.

"Kill him."

The blood in the man was not good, not what he wanted or needed. But the man was between him and the door. To get out to fresh blood, he would have to go past him, or through him.

"You're not going to implicate me." The man talked as he worked. "I'm leaving. You can have your new playmate."

"Kill him," the woman's harsh whisper grated.

Then it was overridden by another sound. A heartbeat. Downstairs. Strong, steady, full of blood.

"Take this." The woman forced something into his hand. His fingers closed over it instinctively. When she pushed him toward the door, he moved on automatic toward the sound of the heartbeat.

Inez watched with satisfaction as Roberto left, one of the bodies slung over his shoulder, and Sonny followed, the wooden stake she'd given him tight in his fist. The end of any relationship was distasteful, particularly when the new lover was disposing of the old.

Sonny's mind was only on the blood that pumped through the heart he could hear so clearly. It didn't occur to him that Roberto had been too busy talking with Inez to even hear it. All he knew was, there was fresh blood downstairs and Roberto was between him and the blood. The weakness he'd felt earlier was gone, replaced with an almost super-human strength that drove him to his addiction.

He tried to push past Roberto, not intending to kill, just wanting to get to the blood that waited downstairs. He shoved the man aside and the blanket-shrouded body tumbled down the stairs. Roberto turned on Sonny, fangs bared, prepared to fight for his life. The reaction stunned Sonny for one brief moment, then his arm came up in an instinctively block, and the stake came with it in an underhanded thrust, penetrating the rib cage to impale the heart. Blood spurted from the wound and onto Sonny, but he ignored it, pushing the body aside and continuing toward the blood.

At the foot of the stairs, Martin watched Crockett grab Cervantes' shoulder, and react to the shove back. Roberto screamed and writhed, the hilt of the stake protruding from his chest.

"Stay back," Nick warned. "He's one of us now."

Castillo took a step back and let Knight sweep past, over the blanket that tumbled down the stairs. A waxen hand stuck out from under the blanket, and Martin didn't want to think it might be human.

Sonny's eyes blazed into Martin; his sole objective seemed to be to get at him. Nick did his best to push him back, keep him at bay. Martin knew what Sonny wanted, and if Nick couldn't hold him back, knew there was every chance Martin Castillo would die tonight.

"He's your friend, Sonny." Nick was doing nothing more than wrestling with Crockett. Neither had a weapon, and though Nick was more focused, Sonny had the impetus of his addiction. "You can beat it. I have blood for you. I'll give it to you, but first we've got to take care of Inez."

There was no reaction except a greater exertion in the attempt to get at Martin.

"Open the case," Nick shouted. Martin realized the vampire had been carrying a small black leather case that now lay on the floor beside the blanket-covered corpse. He knelt and opened it. Two wine bottles. Without question, he took one out, uncorked it and held it up to Nick.

"You know what this is, Sonny." Nick waved the bottle close enough to Sonny's nose for the scent to reach him. "It's blood. You can have it, but you have to take me to Inez."

The smell of blood hit Sonny with a jolt. He hadn't yet learned the difference between human and bovine blood; all he knew was the smell, all he wanted was the taste. When he lunged for the bottle, he was shoved heavily aside.

"Inez." The voice was stern. "Take me to Inez and it's yours."

He growled, making another grab for the bottle that was just out of reach.

"Inez."

"He won't hurt me." They all looked at the top of the stairs. She was beautiful, black hair cascading over her shoulders, green satin dress clinging to every curve, delicate features softening to a smile. "Nicholas. How nice to see you again."

He acknowledged her presence, keeping control of his emotions. "This has to stop. You're going too far." It sounded more like scolding than a threat.

"Sonny," she hissed. "Kill him."

All Crockett's brain registered was the smell of blood. Like any other addict, he wanted his fix. Nick didn't resist when he grabbed the bottle and put it to his lips, sucking eagerly at its contents, some of it dribbling down his chin.

"I warned you before, Inez."

"And I heeded your warning. You told me to leave. I left."

"I told you to stop."

"I'm a vampire, Nicholas. I can no more stop than you can. Blood is the life; I need it to live, just as you do." Her nose wrinkled in distaste. "What's that smell? Cow's blood?"

"Why not?" he retorted. "You look at humans like cattle."

"A deal, Nicholas." She watched Sonny finish the bottle. "Let me walk out the door and you'll never hear of me again."

"Sorry, Inez, I can't do that."

"Then one of us must die." Her voice changed from soft taunting to a harsh command. "Sonny, kill him."

Nick took advantage of Crockett's momentary confusion. "I'm a friend, Sonny. Let me help you."

Not quite human, not fully vampire, Sonny's brain was cloudy. Inez had given him the first sweet, wonderful taste of blood. She had said she was his mistress and he must do as she commanded. This other man--the one she called Nicholas--had fed him and said he was a friend. Who was he to believe?

"I command you, Sonny." Inez raised her voice. "I made you; you must obey me."

Nick voiced Sonny's thoughts. "This isn't a movie, Inez, it's real life. He can make up his own mind."

"Sonny, I order you. Kill him."

"You don't have to. You're not a killer."

Something came to him like a fist in the solar plexus. "Yes," he croaked. "I am."

Nick understood, knowing that the taste of her own blood Inez had given him would surely not be enough to sustain him this long. Someone had died to appease his initial hunger. "You don't have to kill again."

"Kill him!" Inez shouted.

Sonny looked at her, then at Nick, then Marty. He saw the blanket covering the body of one of the men he'd killed. What was another murder?

"You didn't have a choice then." Nick's voice was calm and even, in contrast to Inez' screaming. "You *do* have a choice now. If you listen to her, you do belong to her. If you help me, you're free to be yourself. No one controls you but yourself."

Inez started down the stairs, pitting her will against Nick's, raising her voice to a shout to get through to Sonny. "He's lying. I made you, I control you. You have no will of your own. Didn't I tell you you would kill? Didn't I tell you you'd drink blood?" She waved a hand at Roberto. "Didn't I tell you to kill him?"

There was blood on his hands. He saw Roberto slumped on the stairs, the stake in his heart. That he had done it was inconceivable. He couldn't remember it. He did, however, remember draining the last drop of blood from the body at the foot of the stairs, and two others that still lay in the room upstairs. He had killed not only humans, he had killed cops. Inez had locked him in the room, knowing he would drink, knowing that drink would kill the cops.

With a cry less human than anything Martin had ever heard, Sonny ripped the stake from Roberto's heart and met Inez as she came toward him. The blood-drenched

weapon plunged between her breasts, tearing her heart in two. Her shriek echoing throughout the house, she slumped into Sonny's arms, blood pouring copiously.

"Sonny..." Marty started for him, but Nick waved him back.

"Put her down." He moved up the stairs cautiously, aware of Crockett's unstable condition. He nodded with satisfaction when Sonny laid the body beside Roberto's. "Now let's get cleaned up." He held out a hand and Martin moved swiftly up to them and gave him the small leather case.

* * *

Rico watched the last of the bodies being removed from the house. The sun was well up and police and medical personnel drifted off to their various assignments.

"Damn it, Lieutenant, I want to see him *now*."

Martin took him by the elbow, steering him to the living room. "We have to talk."

"What's there to talk about? He's my partner, dammit, and I have every right to see him."

"Sonny's changed." Something in his tone made Rico sit compliantly and listen.

* * *

The heavy drapes across the windows kept the sunlight out. Sonny lay still in the bed, but he was not asleep. His night vision was good enough to make out the features of the man in the chair beside the bed.

"Who are you?"

Nick filled him in. "When I got the descriptions, I knew who it was. I knew somebody would be in trouble," he finished.

"It's true, isn't it?"

There was no need to ask what. "Yes."

"What do I do now?"

"Learn to deal with it."

"I can't. I killed two cops. I can't live with that. And I sure as hell can't kill anybody else."

"You don't have to," Nick assured him. "Inez told you what she wanted you to believe. We're not like movie vampires; we can live on blood that isn't human."

"I don't want to drink any blood."

"That's not an option anymore."

He sat up angrily. "I'm addicted! There has to be something..."

"Nothing." Nick shook his head. "Only blood can do it."

He did his best to control his temper; it wasn't solving anything. "How long have you...?"

"Over seven hundred years."

"Seven hun... That's not possible."

"I'm afraid it is, and through all that time I've done things I'm not proud of. I had to deal with my dark side." He sensed Crockett's anguish at that thought. "You don't have to. It doesn't matter if I didn't know what I was getting into; I wanted power and I got it. I suppose you could say I was cruel when I was first brought across, and learned my lesson somewhere along the way.

Then he told Crockett how LaCroix had turned him in 1228, when he was young and hungry for power and wealth. "It took me three hundred years to stop treating people as simply cattle, and another three hundred after that to learn that I had no right to judge who was to live and who was to die."

The morning and afternoon were filled with stories of anguish and pain and learning the first lessons in how to deal with a life different from what anyone understood a vampire's life to be. "You have two choices," he said in the end. "Either get yourself killed or learn to deal with it. All in all, I think I've done well by learning how to deal." Although he felt he would never balance his

own scales, Nick knew there was hope for Crockett, and that being the guardian for Sonny that LaCroix never was for him might help to bring about his own redemption somewhere down the line. "You were a cop; you wanted to help your fellow man. Well, now you have powers that will let you do that. It's your choice, Sonny."

* * *

In the living room, Rico paced back and forth, watching the shadows lengthen as the day waned. Castillo was talking with someone from the DEA in the hall, but their voices were too low for him to hear, even if he cared to know what they were talking about. He and Switek had burst in through the back door at Martin's signal, shocked to find two cops and a dealer drained of blood and Inez and Roberto covered with it.

"Sonny! Are you all right?" he'd shouted when he saw the blood covering Crockett's hands and splattered on his clothes. Sonny appeared to be in shock, however, and Knight spirited him up to the master bedroom while Martin coordinated the investigation.

After Forensics was finished in the windowless room upstairs, Switek had helped load the bodies of his co-workers into the "meat wagons" for the trip to the morgue. Rico was so pre-occupied with worry over Crockett, he didn't notice how hard Stan was taking all this.

"I'm...uh...going with them."

Rico nodded absently. "Yeah, Stan. Okay."

"You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, fine."

He stood in the doorway a moment, unsure of whether to go with the dead or stay with the living, then decided and turned to go. Rico barely noticed.

It was Martin's words, more than anything, that kept Rico in the living room the rest of the day. He would've gone straight upstairs to see how his partner was doing, but Martin's tone prevented that.

"We have to talk."

As the sun slid into the Everglades, Rico wondered if it had been a dream or if Martin had really told him stories about the Golden Triangle and people who were not quite human. They'd talked while the DEA and Forensics went through the house, cataloging, searching, photographing. After the stories, Martin left him alone, and he'd eventually drifted to an uneasy sleep in a position that left him stiff-necked and sore.

A logical part of his brain argued that there were no such things as vampires. An illogical part--the part that had gone to Saturday matinees at the local cinema with Rafael--decreed that, if Inez and Roberto were vampires, they would have disintegrated to dust and there would have been no bodies to zip into plastic body bags. And Sonny wouldn't be hiding in a dark room upstairs.

It had been like that when he was a kid: logic during the day, but scared to death of Rafael's ghost stories once night fell. He wondered if Sonny's older brother, Jake, had told stories of vampires and that infamous tale that always ended, "and the hook was on the car door!"

He could easily dismiss it were it not that Martin Castillo had told him. If anyone else had told him about vampires in the Golden Triangle and now in Miami, he would've said they were certifiable and gone up to Sonny. He'd always prided himself on being rational and not believing in things that couldn't be proven. That was before he'd been injected with Legba's "zombie juice". What was it Hamlet said? There were more things in heaven and earth...

Doors closed, cars started, and the house got quiet. There was one other time Rico was wary of seeing his partner: after Sonny had suffered amnesia and, as his undercover personality, done things Sonny Crockett in his right mind would never have done. There were still nights when Rico woke, wondering what might have happened if he hadn't let Sonny go on the meet that had resulted in the amnesia in the first place. He'd consoled himself at those times by vowing never to fail a

partner again. When a door closed upstairs, he knew it was put-up or shut-up time and he'd have to make good on that vow or walk out the front door right now.

Martin stood in the door leading to the kitchen, his presence giving Rico moral support. The sun sank lower, darkness crept in, and when he appeared in the hall doorway, Sonny's features were obscured by shadow. Rico swallowed.

"You okay?" he asked softly, trying not to be obvious as he checked Sonny for any subtle differences.

Crockett's voice was soft and raspy. "Yeah."

"Want to talk about it?"

There was a noticeable pause, and he remembered a time when Sonny had told him to mind his own business and not get involved in his life, then turned up later wanting to talk.

"I'm not the same man I was."

That gave Rico hope; at least he wasn't being shut out.

"Mind if I turn on the light?"

"No."

There was nothing visibly different; there were no fangs. He was a little pale, but after what he'd been through, it was understandable that he'd be a little green around the gills. He sat in the chair where Rico had napped. Uneasy but determined not to show it, Rico sat on the edge of a sofa cushion.

"You look tired."

"So do you," Sonny countered.

"I caught a nap."

"Been here all day?"

"Yes."

"You must be hungry."

"You, too..." He stopped. "I mean..." He looked at Martin for help.

"I had something," Crockett said candidly.

Rico didn't want to think what that something might be, and was not about to ask.

"There are a few things you need to know. We both need to know," he amended. "If you feel as weird about this as I do..." He looked up as Nick entered.

Nick looked at them: Martin just inside the door, Sonny trying not to fidget, Rico on the edge of his seat like he wanted to bolt out the door. In terms as plain and concise as possible, he told them about vampires, how they're made, and how they have to exist. It was important that they all know what was involved, and he told them everything: how Sonny could survive on animal blood or even plasma if necessary; what sunlight would do to him; that he was not an animated corpse that slept in a coffin all day; how he could survive by functioning during the dark hours. Only one thing was omitted: that Nick Knight had been a vampire for over 700 years. Martin had somehow known from the beginning; Crockett had been told upstairs when he needed to be calmed down; and Rico was on a need-to-know basis--and this was not something he needed to know.

"You're the same as you were yesterday," he concluded. "The only difference is, your diet has changed and you have to stay out of the sun."

"This is Miami, pal."

Rico was encouraged by the quip and added one of his own. "So work the night shift." He thought he saw Nick smile. "Between the two of us, we can do round-the-clock surveillance. I'll take days, you take nights."

"That'd be fine if we were still cops."

"The offer still stands." Martin stepped into the ring of lamplight. "I'd like you to stay in Miami."

"No," Rico said quickly. "Too much sun. He should go somewhere..."

"Where, partner? Spend my winters in Alaska where it's dark for six months? Then head for the South Pole for the summer? I don't like cold weather, and I'm not running away. It won't change just because I leave Miami."

"No, but your tan will fade, and how would that look?"

Nick made a suggestion. "If you curtail your blood intake and start taking

garlic pills, you might be able to sit under a sun lamp for a few minutes a day." He couldn't miss the look that passed between them. "I've studied this for a long time. There are also chemicals, if you want to go that way."

One question bothered Rico. "Where will he get blood?"

"I've taken care of that," Martin told him. There was no need to ask what connections he'd turned up. He had more resources than Tubbs had ever imagined.

"So." The silence hung heavily for a moment before he thought of something to say. "You ever consider a night job in Southern law enforcement?"

Sonny chuckled. "Maybe, Tubbs. Maybe."

* * *

The house was cooled by an evening breeze. Sonny could smell salt air and night-blooming jasmine. He turned when he heard someone come into the room.

"Well," he sighed. "For better or worse, I'm going to give it a try."

Nick looked troubled for a moment. "I have to leave."

"I know. I'll be okay."

"There are things I have to tell you."

"I'm okay," he insisted.

"You are now, but that may not last. You were in Vietnam. How was it when you came home?"

He didn't want to remember the nightmares, cold sweats, and irrational fears.

"It was okay when you came home, but once things had a chance to settle, the stress came. They used to call it shell shock, then post traumatic stress, but it's the same thing."

"I got through that, I'll get through this."

"Just be aware that it will come, there's no if's about it. You've just been turned. There's a period of euphoria. You feel invincible, powerful, like you can tackle the world. Then one day you crash. You'll need help getting through that." He didn't let Sonny interrupt. "You *will* need help getting through that. You have my number, and Marty knows how to reach me. Don't try to brave it out."

"I'll be okay."

His hand cleft the air. "No," he said sharply. "You went through Nam. I went through the Crusades, the War of the Roses, the Civil War, both World Wars, and wars you've never heard of. It's nothing--nothing--like what you'll go through."

Properly chastened, Sonny nodded.

"One more thing. If you have a dark side, you have to be aware that the power surging through you now can stir it up to something unbelievably evil. It's not like when you had amnesia. This is you. You'll be aware of what you're doing. It's not like a split personality. It will be something you have to deal with every day until you come to terms with it. It will always be there, because you're a vampire now. I don't know what causes it, probably the idea that you're immortal and powerful. Whatever it is, you have to guard against it and remember that *you* are in charge. Don't let it get out of control.

"You're going to find that your senses are sharper now. You can see better in the dark, your hearing will improve. You know you can fly. You've chosen to be a cop. Use those senses and abilities to be the kind of cop you always wanted to be."

Sonny digested it with a frown. "Will it hit me like the stress did? One day I flip out and attack my friends?"

"It's insidious; it'll creep up on you little by little and you won't even notice. If you're aware of it, you'll be on guard."

"Will it pass?"

"Eventually, but I can't tell you how long it'll take. Some of us get over it faster than others. Some never get over it."

He thought of Inez. "Yeah."

"Don't buy all the stereotypes. Vampires are like humans; each one's an individual."

The phone rang and Sonny excused himself to answer. It was Tubbs. "Hey,

partner, you ready to go to work?"

And that's how it began.....

******

[A sequel by J.J. Jones is planned for GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 3, and Karen is considering doing a third installment for a future issue.]

[Karen Howard is currently working on a mainstream vampire novel that may grow into a series. The bulk of her fan fiction has been in MIAMI VICE:

"Lament," in Our Favorite Things, Elan Press, P.O. Box 615, Macedon, NY 14502-0615.
Poetry for Vice Verse 1 and 2, Elan Press, address above.
"Thoughts of Long Ago," in Everything But the Kitchen Sink 4, Markalaine Press, RFD 1, Box 250, Walker, WV 26180.
"Eye of the Zombie," and "Tangled Web," in Sanity Maintenance 2 and 3, both out of print. Editor has dropped Miami Vice fandom and moved, address unknown.
"Billy's Got a Gun," (Miami Vice/Wiseguy crossover) Fan Q Award winner, in Gold Coast 3, % Brenda Cunningham, Box123, Assiniboia, Sask., CANADA, SOH OBO.
"Brothers in Arms," in Still Viced 1, same address as Gold Coast.
Behind Blue Eyes, Miami vice novella, self-published. %Karen Howard, 6545 Indian Creek Dr., #303, Miami Beach FL.

Karen has also written several stories and poems for her own MIAMI VICE publication, Crockett Dial (That's Alligator, Darlin', Al-li-gator); issue #4 was winner of the Fan Q award for best MIAMI VICE fiction zine.]

THE TROUBLE WITH SHELDON
by
Charles Weindel

It is his heart which gives my soul life --

- J A C K -

Sheldon Long...

SHELDON LONG!

I laugh as I look through Sheldon's eyes. Sheldon Long, he is my maker. He is the writer and I am the character, yet sometimes I wonder about this. Nine months ago Sheldon finished his best selling novel, Death of a Vampire. Even though that was when the character of Jack was born by becoming published, I've lived within Sheldon for quite a few years. In the last nine months, I've become more and more real with each passing day. My name is Jack. I have no last name. Sheldon thought it would be better for my being, he said it would give my being a mysterious side. Yes! I am the Vampire Jack. Something strange took place a few nights after the book hit the stores. I became real! Not in the way of having my own body and mind, but by having a soul that lives inside of my maker Sheldon Long. I was lying upon his large bed. I felt the wind blow through the window. The experience was one that I could not even begin to find words to express. Then something even more powerful took over my thoughts. Blood. I craved the blood of any living thing. So I took advantage of having a body to use at will, and went into the woods behind Sheldon's house. There I became a savage. I tore apart small animals. I drank the life-giving fluid of the small creatures. I found this to be enough to maintain myself without harming any other human being. Now, as the novel went, Sheldon made me up to be a Don Juan type of vampire. I fought desperately with him on this, but in the end he overpowered my will. But now that I have a body that I can use I believe I might be able to win, to make him stop the lust which was born due to my ignorance. I'm so unsure I don't really know if I can stop him. This is why I write. What I became conscious of the other night was frightening, my eyes blurred into focus and there in my hands lay a small child of no more than thirteen. My soul weeps for the loss of such a being, but this will not bring life back to the limp body of that child. Please! Someone? Anyone that reads this take heed and come drive a stake through my creator's heart. I shall sacrifice myself so no harm will be done to the innocent of any living being. The.....address.....of.....where.....this.....killer.....of children lives..... is.....

It is his soul which gives my heart burning desire.

-Jack Long

- THE END -

BITTER CHOICE

How can you ask that of me?

I thought you understood, Nat
And maybe you do
But at this moment
It doesn't matter to you at all

I can't offer him life, not really
Only this shadow, this imitation
That I have lived for nearly eight hundred years
And that you have mistaken for humanity

I thought you understood
You have been my reason, my conscience
My stability
Now, suddenly, everything is chaos again

Maybe I'd be better prepared for this
If I'd seen past your confident, professional facade
Noticed there was a vulnerable human being behind it

It still amazes me that you trust me with your life
But I see now how closely you've hidden your heart
I suppose that's wise
I've killed a few of those in my time too
Up till now I thought yours was safe

Now I've learned differently
And it terrifies me to see you like this
To know that grief and exhaustion
Can shatter your defenses
And reduce you to a desperate, demanding little girl
To hear your broken voice through
The memories playing out in my mind
Saying terrible, hurtful things
That you would never even think
If the pieces of your mind were in their proper order
Isn't that my job?

And I'm trying to do yours
Trying to give you my shoulder to lean on
And talk you out of madness
How many times have you done it for me?
But I don't know how

Don't ask this of me, Nat
I'm begging you
You know, don't you,
That I can't refuse you anything
Can't risk seeing you walk out that door
Never to return

I'll do anything, beloved friend
Even this terrible thing
That can only result in disaster
To drive that lost, haunted look from your eyes
To bring back the strong, confident Natalie I know
With her peculiar combination of wisdom and innocence
That comes, I think,
Of seeing too much and living too little

Bit by bit, that innocence is slipping away
I'm afraid I'm to blame for that
And as for the wisdom...
Well, I wanted to believe all those things too

It's so easy for me to forget
That even by mortal standards
You are far too young to know as many things
With as much certainty
As we have both chosen to believe

You will never be the same in my eyes
But I think that's for the best
Humanity isn't perfect, remember?
And you are, after all,
My role model in this quest
To reclaim my humanity

No matter what comes of this choice
And I fear the worst
I hope you know that I will never condemn you for it
You're allowed to be wrong too
But take it from me:
Be prepared for the consequences

Which doesn't mean
I won't be there to help you deal with them
What kind of friend would I be
If I abandoned you at a time like this?

All right, Nat
I'll do this for you
You'll have to pray for it to come out right
I'm not foolish enough
To believe God still listens to me

And when all is said and done
We will neither of us be the same
I hope we will be stronger

-Valerie Lynn Meachum
October 12, 1992

STINGRAY was a short-lived NBC series that appeared off and on from 1985 to 1987. Nick Mancuso, a handsome, dark-haired, very physical Italian-Canadian played the title role. During the course of 23 episodes and a pilot we found out very little about the character's past. We knew he was a Viet Nam veteran haunted by dreams. We knew that he performed risky "favors" for strangers and asked only a favor in return. We never learned Ray's real identity: he might have been active in military intelligence or the Central Intelligence Agency. he was presented as a "karate" expert (Mr. Mancuso has trained in aikido) and a chameleon-like master of disguise. We knew Ray had an almost supernatural habit of disappearing into the shadows when he didn't want to be seen (some of the fans theorize that he had a transporter built into his sunglasses, but I digress). We saw him dodge bullets, yet take a bullet rather than let someone else get shot. At the end of each episode, he would drive off in his black Corvette Stingray and both he and the car would disappear from the Tv screen. In short, Stingray was full of mystery. Perhaps that is why the series was so intriguing.]

P.S. If you're still having trouble getting into this character, think of him this way: a Lone Ranger (sans Tonto) for the 'eighties, driving a black Corvette instead of riding a white horse.

PROMISES

by

Heidi Staneslow

It was after nine when Alexsander returned from his meeting with the police, and from the way he closed the heavy oaken door, shaking the tiny windows that ran along the door frame as it slammed shut, I knew that the news had not been good. Almost instinctively I shielded my mind from his feelings, in slight fear of their intensity. Folding the letter I'd written, I then tucked it under the small side drawer of the mahogany desk in the sitting room where I had been waiting for him. It was a last resort, after a phone call each day for a week and a half had failed to get me any response. And it was best sent without Alexi's knowledge; he would accept help if given, but I knew from my own experience that he would rarely ask for it. Before leaving the little room I turned on the side lamp and tossed a book on the chair by it, to cover my being there if he should ask. Before leaving the little room, I smoothed my hair back over my shoulders and checked my reflection in the sitting room window.

Alexsander stood at the end of the hall, a tall silhouette in the shadows, staring out a window at the side of the staircase. It was fifty-five degrees out and pouring rain--very unusual for the second week of December.

"Nothing," he said flatly as I approached. He continued to stare out the window.

I jumped slightly, not expecting him to have heard my approach. " 'Lexi..." I began, suddenly unsure of what I had meant to say. I reached my hand up to rest on his shoulder.

"They have recovered these." He turned his dark brown eyes to look at me for a moment, then placed a black plastic bag in my hand. "The attitude of the police seems to be that if they recover your most expensive items you should be satisfied and leave them alone." He turned back to the darkness of the window. "Even if the most valuable item is still missing."

I stood for a moment at the window, until my breath fogged the panes. Alexi's view of the rainy night stayed clear, of course, having no breath to fog his view. He was lost in thought again, thoughts I would allow my mind to neither reach nor sense. For almost two weeks it had been this way. This had been the first year Alexsander Ledjescu had been willing to risk any sort of holiday celebration. Despite how watered down the holiday had become, it was still a Christian holiday, and I knew that his vampiric nature did not mix well with the symbols of Christian faith. While I believed this effect to be only psychological, it wasn't something that he was easily convinced of, despite some gains he had made. Finally he had agreed to a limited sort of celebration, if for no other reason then to avoid raising any of the questions that an undecorated home might raise. Almost two weeks ago the gifts that he had bought, along with some other small items, had been stolen on a rare night when both of us had been out.

Something splashed at my feet--cold water dripping off Alexi's coat onto the intricate patterns of the inlaid wood. "'Lexi, you're ruining the floor." I said it

softly, but with an edge I knew would cut through his daze. It worked and he shrugged off the soaked wool and I caught it. In the reflection of the room in the tall window the coat appeared from dark nothingness as I took it into my hands.

* * *

As I buttoned my white lab coat, John made his pronouncement. "You're late!"

I glanced from the clock to my watch, shaking my head in victory. "Still got two minutes!" I apologized to him anyway, knowing that his wife couldn't leave for work until he was home to watch their child. "Anything I should know about?"

"Not really. Those just came in." He pointed to a rack of samples. "After that it should be pretty quiet until the sevens come in."

I slipped on a pair of gloves and picked up the advance list for the seven o'clock blood draw; the number of patients on it was more than there had been for weeks, and this morning was hematology clinic as well. I shook my head. "By eleven we'll be swimming in blood."

"That's OK," he said. "At least the day will go by faster." He hefted his backpack and started for the door, turning back halfway there to stick a post-it note on my blood analyzer. "I almost forgot to tell you: Hemmings wants to see you at one."

I nodded and thanked him in a distracted way. On top of having to face the day with a headache from another sleepless night, on top of having to face 7 A.M. with open eyes, I now also had to face the lab supervisor. I assumed that it had something to do with the change of shift I'd applied for, and prayed that that was all.

* * *

One o'clock found me at the door to Hemmings' office, chilled, I kept telling myself, from the hospital's policy of not wasting heat on the corridors.

As I entered the room, I caught a faint scent of cigarette smoke. It brought to my mind a time and place, as well as a person.

"You're five minutes early," the man observed as he moved behind Hemmings' desk.

"Ray, I..." I smiled slightly as a different set of nerves kicked in. The door fell closed and clicked shut. "I didn't expect to see you here."

He folded his arms and gave me a critical stare. "You left me a message a day for the last week..."

"Week and a half," I corrected absently, staring at the floor and its institutional carpeting of mixed blues rather than into his dark eyes. For all that I'd needed to talk to him, I now found myself suddenly unsure if I could tell him just why I'd tried so desperately to reach him. Part of me was still afraid of his rejection, although just the fact that he had traveled this far to meet me was a sign in my favor. Thinking of that gave me back my normal strength; as I looked over at him I resolved to do my best to keep the upper hand in our conversation.

"Hematology seems a strange place for someone of your...associations."

I threw the jab back at him. "I don't know--I actually think that it's quite the proper place, although it could be argued that blood bank would be even better."

He hadn't paid any attention to my comment. Instead he pulled an envelope, my envelope, from the inner pocket of his suit jacket. "This," he held it up, "endangered not only you, but also those at this address." He rose and crossed the room to what might have been a bar if Hemmings hadn't been such a fanatical health nut.

Taking his lighter from a pocket he lit the envelope. As the yellow flames licked lazily at the damp paper he dropped it into the sink; after a minute or so he washed away the charred remains.

I leaned forward slightly, holding onto the back of the chair that stood in front of the compulsively neat desk, and met his eyes. "There were eleven calls

because I had no response from you." I kept my voice level, cold. "I wasn't even sure if I had the right number. I only sent the letter when I had given up on reaching you by phone." I didn't ask how he had gotten hold of it so fast. I knew better.

He seated himself behind the desk, smoothing the grey suit jacket in a way that seemed both natural and out of place. "I won't ask you how you got that address if..."

"If I promise not to use it again?" I finished another sentence for him, picking up the old habit. I looked to the floor again for a moment before once more meeting his eyes. "I agree."

I slid into the soft chair as he began. "If you're thinking of leaving Alexsander I know of a place where you'd be safe."

"Leave!?" I gave him as hard a stare as I could and added an incredulous shake of my head. "Why?"

"For a normal life?" he pressed, with a look that told me the offer was sincere.

I gave a sharp laugh of disbelief. "To me I *have* a 'normal' life. I miss out on nothing in my relationship with Alexi." I met his questioning stare. "Nothing. Besides, my fate is decided--whether I'm with him or not will not change my future." As I spoke his coolness faded somewhat, and for a second it was as it had been two and a half years ago. Even though Alexi had never harmed Ray, it was as if Ray had expected to be harmed. As if once his back was turned Alexi would pounce on him like a starving animal. This only made the rest of what I had to say all the more difficult. "It's on Alexsander's behalf that I contacted you. This was much easier in the letter; did you..."

He rested his elbows on the desk. "I don't deal in letters."

I felt for the right place to begin. "Almost two weeks ago Alexsander's home, our home," I corrected, "was burglarized. Most of the items taken were only presents, for Christmas." I saw him move as if to question that, but I didn't let him. "They aren't the problem. One item--it was gold--it was always in my side room."

He nodded in remembrance of it, shifting behind the pseudo-oak desk. "I was convinced it was some sort of brass or electroplate, until I tried to pick it up."

"It was gold," I continued. Obviously he had no idea what the significance of it was. I did my best to stay calm, knowing well that too much emotion would only make him suspicious. Ray knew I wasn't the hysterical type. "As close to pure as was workable; between the metal and the workmanship, it was worth over nine thousand dollars forty-five years ago."

"Sorry Sabri, I didn't travel all this way to track a stolen antique. I don't care how valuable it is, or who you are." He rose and started for the door.

I gave up on calm. After all the work I had put into getting him here I was not about to lose him. Digging my lab-regulation short nails into the minimal padding of the armrest I turned in the chair and fixed him with my coldest stare. "Damn it! You owe me! And Alexi! I always took your word to be a promise!"

He stopped, his hand holding the polished door of the office. "And I assumed that you'd call me only if it was important--very important--not trying to find your lost bookend!"

"Did you ever look inside it?" I rose, taking advantage of his delay, and followed him to the door, gently freeing it from his grasp and letting it close. I didn't want to share our conversation with the whole nurses' lounge. "Ray--you know me--you know Alexi. And you should know that neither of us would bother you if it were as trivial as that!"

Ray sighed harshly and turned away from the door. "I tried looking inside it," he admitted. "The lid wouldn't come off. I assumed it was stuck. And there didn't seem to be anything in there." He sighed again and ran a hand through his hair. "What *was* in there, anyway? The crown jewels of a forgotten kingdom?"

"No, nothing that glamorous." There was no easy way to say what I needed to say. Again I felt the chill of the damp day and folded my arms, burying my hands in

the woolly folds of the sweater. "Nothing so simple. It's a funerary urn. It contains the ashes of Alexsander's former lover. She should never have been cremated." I took a step closer to Ray, who had taken a step backwards, closer to the door, as I had revealed this information. "At the time, he had to have known what was happening to her, he had to have felt it as it was happening, but he had no way to stop it."

"Do you want this back for Alexsander's sentimental attachment to it? Or for his guilt at not saving her?" He sidestepped me, moving back to the desk and sitting on its edge, eyeing me cautiously.

I walked to the window without speaking. Staring out at the wet, gray city, I tried to hide my irritation with his attitude. As much as he knew me, he still felt compelled to test me, to test the sincerity of my purpose in summoning him. I did my best to stay calm, to throw his tests and jabbing questions back at him. "Yes," I admitted, hearing him sigh harshly. "In part. Alexsander owed a lot to this woman." I absently twisted at the cord of the blinds, then glanced quickly at Ray. "*I* owe a lot to this woman. And so long as this item is missing, part of Alexi's mind is missing too." Ray seemed restless; I was only confusing him more. "Not literally; he's just..." I felt tears rise, but denied them. "He's distant, dazed, moody; not violent, only..." I made a vague, hopeless gesture. "...numb. And part of me feels that, and goes with him." I broke off once again and moved away from the window, once more composed enough to look him in the eye. "I can't help doing it, catching his feelings when they're so strong. I need this item back as much for my sake as for his."

I let him take it all in. If he wanted to leave, fine. I was tired of his games, especially after the promise he'd made to both Alexi and me at one time. If he left I'd have to find my own way of recovering the urn, or of pulling Alexi out of this dark mood, but I could probably manage it all right. Then I recalled something else, something Alexi had once hinted at, but never fully explained to me, something that might give Ray a stronger reason for staying. But after a moment's consideration, I realized that it was probably more likely to frighten him away.

"The contents?" he asked, giving me a wary look.

Lost in thought I must have muttered my concerns aloud. "Nothing." I made a gesture of dismissal. "Something I'm not even sure is possible under those circumstances."

I caught the look in those eyes and smiled inwardly. He was curious, and he was hooked, even though he may not have realized that himself yet. Suddenly my nerves were gone. "I should be able to tell you more tonight."

He gave a quick, nervous smile. "You're off at three?"

"Yes," I agreed, taking his hand before we both left the room. "But I think it would be best if I had the chance beforehand to let Alexsander know that you're here to help. Why don't we say more like seven?"

"What happened to 'Alexsander trusts you as much as he trusts me?' Those *were* your words, weren't they?"

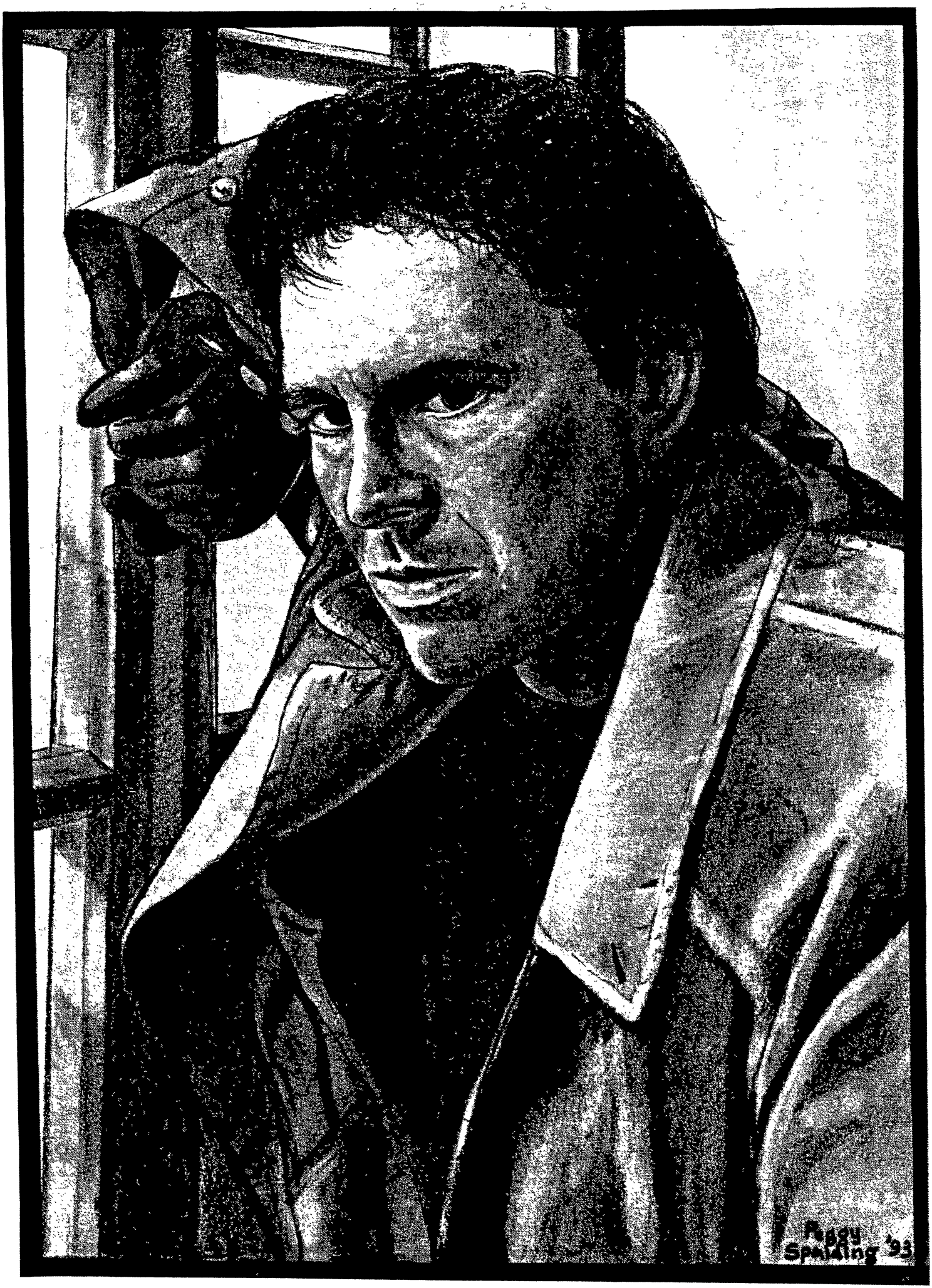
"He did. He still does. It's just that with the way he's been..." My eyes shifted nervously. Discussing my feelings about Alexi in the middle of the hospital corridor left me very uneasy.

* * *

Alexsander was awake, lying on the bed in his quilted sleeping robe, a robe heavily impregnated with his native soil. The room was dimly lit by a side lamp and firelight, but I knew it was a comfortable brightness to him. He seemed lost in thought, staring into the flames, not even realizing that I was there until I sat at his side.

"You're lost again," I said lightly, but with definite interest. Maybe if he would share his exact thoughts then the resonance that I kept picking up might not be so formless and disturbing. "You've been so worried..."

"It's beyond worry," he replied, taking my hand. It was warm enough in the


Peggy
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room so that his hand was warmer than my own, which were like ice from November to May. "That's the mildest part of it. Anger, loss; so much the same now as then."

Again he was silent, staring into the flames. In the firelight his pale skin had a warm glow, cut with the blackest of shadows above his eyes and under his cheekbones. For a moment I watched as the shadows melted and danced over his face. And as I searched for a way to tell him about Ray.

"Alexsander?" I probed, using the same tone as before and still holding his hand. "When you're like this--you've seen what I go through--I can't sleep or eat, or think--I can't be near you. I had to do something." I shifted around on the dark chintz bedspread, my fingers brushing at one of the smudge-like shadows on his cheek.

At my last words he sat fully upright and gently captured my hand at his cheek. "Do not leave." He said it as more of a command than a request, though he knew that no command of his would hold me. Belatedly he modified it. "Please."

Looking down at the twining paisley field that covered the bed I shook my head. "Never," I whispered. "It's something else that I had to do." I took a deep breath. "I had to ask for help..."

"The police can't help," he repeated. "No one can, not without knowing what I am. And if I search for it myself..." He dropped my hand and continued to stare at the flames. "...I have the same risk."

"No," I said, rising from the bed and moving before the flames to thaw my aching hands. "Ray--have you considered him?"

"Yes. But his offer is too valuable to waste on something so..." His voice faded away.

"Something so trivial?" I finished, turning to face him and warm my back. "It's not trivial, not to me, 'Lexi. She meant so much to you; with her you changed so." I moved back to his side, my shadow flaring wildly as the flames danced. "Besides, I have a favor of my own to use for this. You changed so much after you met her," I repeated.

"Not that much." His voice was soft and he was smiling slightly, attempting to make light of my seriousness. Still, he seemed to be considering something. "And if we could contact Ray, how long would it be before he could be here to help?"

He seemed not to want an answer, but I gave a quick glance at my watch. "Perhaps only hours. I managed to reach him last week," I replied to Alexi's questioning stare, failing to mention any of the trouble I'd had along the way. "He'll be here tonight."

"Then, if we are fortunate, this all should be over soon." He twisted at a stray curl that had fallen over my shoulder and held me close. I deliberately hoped that he was right, as this near I felt his fear, translated by my body into brutal waves of nausea.

* * *

"The police found nothing," Alexsander replied to Ray's question. "They had no leads to any person or people. The only motive seems to have been the acquisition of valuable, lightweight items."

Ray frowned slightly. "Hit and run. They didn't try for anything else?"

It was about eight-thirty, and, just as on the other night, it was raining. Alexsander and Ray sat in chairs on opposite sides of the fireplace, and I sat on the floor between them, trying to bake the persistent chill from my body.

Alexi shook his head. "They never touched the electronics. Not a fingerprint's worth." He sighed and drew new breath harshly, looking to the corner where a rather nice stereo system softly thumped a beat that I almost recognized. "If it couldn't be carried out in their hands they didn't want it."

"You're certain that robbery was the only motive?" Ray shifted in his chair and looked from me to Alexi.

"That someone may have suspected what I am and used the robbery as a cover to search my home?" Alexsander turned to me for a moment. "We've already considered

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that possibility."

"Nothing particularly incriminating was in view," I added, staring at the twisting design of the oriental rug in front of me. "Nor is anything of that nature missing."

"That jewelry," I added as Ray opened the black plastic bag Alexi had handed him and I took a deep swallow of my black tea, "was recovered in a raid on a drug dealer. I would think that their motive was clear."

"The police looked no further," Alexi explained as Ray dug out one of the items, "and they implied that I should be satisfied with what I have there."

One piece was a necklace, a twining pattern of ruby leaves with diamond accents. Firelight glittered warmly off gold. "You should--this could buy a week-long party for a crack-house. It's a miracle they recovered any of this stuff!"

Alexi rose suddenly and stood by the mantel, staring up at the pine garland that twisted its way around the walls of the living room, kept fresh by the coolness of the stone. "That," he indicated the necklace, "is replaceable, one of several like it. Expensive, yes! But new, and no more than what it is, stone and metal. This other...has far greater value than its materials."

Ray dropped the jewelry back into the bag, shifting to a more upright position in the tapestry-covered chair and keeping a cautious eye on Alexi and his sudden shift of mood. "Sabri has already told me of this thing's unusual...uh...contents."

"Yes." Alexsander walked to the window as the wind lashed a mix of ice and rain against the glass. "It's more than that."

For a couple of minutes there was no sound in the room except for the small sounds of the fire, the rain and the stereo. Then Alexsander turned and spoke again. "What it contains is certainly precious. There is so little I have of my past, so little I'd want to have. And loss of this means not only the loss of a person--she who I lost 50 years ago--but of a whole part of my life." He paused and fixed his cutting stare on Ray. "Time has taught me that memory of the past is not enough. Without..." He paused for a moment, momentarily shifting his eyes to the window where raindrops clung to their silver trails. "...Without some *thing* of that time, of that person or of that place, the memories will fade in your mind, until one night they seem no more than some desperate, enchanting dream, and no one is there to tell you otherwise. Take that as an explanation, Ray. And as a warning!" he concluded harshly and walked back to the mantel, not speaking, his mind turbulent enough to make me glad that there was nothing more in my stomach than my tea. Again he stared up at the garlands. Ray was silent, transfixed by Alexi's words, and no doubt unsure of just how to reply. "After a time you pray--to God, yes," he looked quickly at Ray, his eyes seeming very large and very dark in the dim light. "You pray that it wasn't all a dream; but still you never know.

"However," he went on, his tone dismissing any further discussion of his words, rearranging his chair to some more exact, imaginary line before once again sitting, "all these explanations won't gain us anything--we need to talk of action."

* * *

At five-thirty the next morning I felt my way downstairs, forcing myself farther from my bed, which beckoned me with promises of six more hours of sleep under the warmth of a pile of comforters. I resisted by fixing my mind on the thought that within a month my "day" would be winding down at this hour, once I switched to the more agreeable overnight shift.

Lights on or not, out of bed for half an hour or not, I wouldn't be awake for another two hours, and I kept a cautious tight grip on the wear-polished wooden banister as I descended the stairs. A year before, my feet had tangled four steps from the bottom, and if it hadn't been for my habit of trailing a hand on the banister I would have hit the stone landing head first. Even so, I had been left with a very interesting bruise from hitting an ornamental carving on the banister, and a limp that had lasted for weeks.

Lost in thought, I almost fell again. Scared, but oddly thankful for the

ability of the adrenaline to wake me up, I made my way to the kitchen and closed its heavy door behind me. The room was large, at least double the size of the bedroom I'd had growing up, which hadn't been small. Obviously it had been designed to be run by servants for a much larger household than was there now. Most of it lay under the thin film of dust that crept in every week, despite either my efforts or Alexi's.

In one corner sat a friendlier bank of more modern appliances. I set a cup of water and a tea bag in the microwave and then turned on an electric heater to drive the chill away. The real heat wouldn't go on until around three, after Alexi had awakened and before I was home. As I sat sipping hot tea and forcing back my six o'clock nausea so I could proceed with breakfast, Ray entered, not through the door by which I had entered from the house, but through a rather inconspicuous door that exited the house by the garage and stable.

At ten the previous evening I'd left the discussion in favor of some sleep; in the time that I'd been there nothing had been decided anyway, except for some agreements on what not to do. Whether it had been part of any plan or on his own initiative, Ray had apparently spent the night crawling around the city where the recovered items had been found. I recognized the rather worn woolen coat that I used in the stables in the winter. The rest of his clothing matched; dirty, worn and thoroughly soaked from the rain. He gave me a brief, if slightly weary, greeting and grabbed the chair to my left.

"Tea?" I asked as I rose, turning the heater toward him.

"Coffee," he countered, shrugging off the wet coat.

"Instant?" I asked, digging through the cupboard shelves, finally finding what I sought. "All we have is decaf, I'm afraid."

He hesitated a moment. This was the only level of conversation I could handle at so early an hour. "Tea," he finally agreed, and I set it to brewing and then relieved him of the wet coat.

I set his cup down, glanced at the time and dug a snowy white doughnut out of the box. "There's better stuff than these, if you'd prefer. I'm afraid I'm not much of a breakfast person."

"Maybe later," he considered, wiping some damp hair off his forehead.

"I'll leave you free run of the kitchen; that includes the washer and dryer, in case you're sick of dripping." I finished my tea and changed the subject. "Did you find out anything?"

"You're home by four, right?"

I looked into his dark eyes for a moment and saw no answer to my question. I accepted his shift of subject as his answer, his way of saying that he'd gotten nowhere. I answered him with a silent nod, twisted my cup in the saucer and did my own shifting. "I managed to get next week off by switching vacation weeks with someone on second shift."

He filed my oblique offer of help away without comment, and caught me off guard with his next question. "How have you gotten Alexi to celebrate a holiday like this? When I last saw the two of you, he could hardly stand to be in the same room as this." He pulled a hollow silver cross from his shirt pocket, one he still held from our last meeting, and tossed it onto the white tablecloth. "And you weren't too much better with it yourself."

I checked my watch and smiled, taking my cup to the counter. "Excuse me, Ray; I have a forty minute ride ahead of me. I can't discuss that now."

I had my coat on and had fished my keys from the depths of my purse by the time his voice caught me at the door. "Sabri!" His voice cut the morning air and stopped me for a second.

I stared at the door handle for a second and then left him with a rather cryptic reply. "If fear can be learned, it can also be unlearned." I didn't look back.

* * *

Ray didn't ask me about our fractured conversation, not that evening, nor the next morning as we wound our way toward a coastal city. I didn't offer to dredge up the topic, either. The task of the morning was to check antique dealers for the container, on the assumption that it may have been sold off for whatever cash it might bring. The day before, his check of pawn shops hadn't resulted in anything, and a second night on the streets had yielded similar results. Hopefully, within two or three hours we could return home, the object recovered for whatever ridiculous price the dealer was asking.

His "house nerves" had returned; I'd noticed that this morning. As soon as we'd left the driveway he relaxed. The change in him was so subtle that it was impossible to define, only to sense. He was more at ease away from the house, and would only be completely at ease when he could leave the house and Alexi behind for good.

As I contemplated just what the source of his fear was, I brushed back a mousse-slicked hair that had stuck to the side of my face. I'd managed to catch Ray before he left the house that morning, guessing in full what his intentions for the day had to be. I pressed him not to go alone, reminding him that I knew the area better, that I knew the stores better and that certainly I must know better than he just what the urn looked like. I kept pressing on these as well as a few other points until he gave in.

However, Ray had not been about to let me come along so easily. "You're not going with me dressed like that?" he had asked me, making the burden of taking me along sound like the weight of the world.

I took a quick look at the neat-but-casual jeans and sweater that I had on in plans to do some local shopping. "What's wrong with this?" I asked, folding my arms defensively.

"We go in dressed like that and they may assume that we're part of a sting operation looking for stolen goods."

It would probably be a long day, and I found myself to be quite comfortably dressed for it. "Suddenly you can't stand to speak the truth?"

"If they have it, they'll never let us know. Besides they may assume worse--that we're a couple of yuppies out Christmas shopping. Then they'll overcharge us as well."

"The bottom line, Ray--what are you planning here?" I could see that he was leading this somewhere; probably, I now realized, he'd planned on getting me to go with him from the moment he thought of whatever little plan he had. I didn't know whether to be scared or annoyed by that. He had taken me by the arm and led me back to the staircase while we were talking.

"We're heading to a university city, correct? Cities such as that have large art communities, correct? A store's desire for prestige, notoriety, and free advertising should get us far."

I froze as we were half way up the stairs. "What's the *whole* plan? Just what do I have to do in this?"

He stared at me for a second. "I am your agent, you are my artist." He slipped into the new persona. "We're almost ready on your latest exhibition, but we need a few more little pieces to accent it..."

"Oh? And what is this exhibition all about...?"

* * *

I tugged at the close neckline of the black wool jersey dress that covered me almost from ankle to chin, and wondered just what might qualify as too weird to believe now that we were in a college city where it seemed half the population had some mix of shaved patches and rainbow hues on their heads.

"Ready?" he asked, pulling up to one of only a handful of antique stores that were open in the city on Saturdays.

I nodded, feeling the smoothly slicked hair still damp against my neck.

He gave a quick look at my severe, almost morbid costume and gave a quick shake

of his head before giving his approval. I gave a look in the mirror. In the weak morning sun my skin looked uniformly pale, broken by black eyeliner and lips a shade pinker than flesh. The effect was striking in an odd way, but not quite bizarre. Taking a deep breath I steadied my nerves.

* * *

" ...She needs some pieces to accent a collection of her work."

"The theme?" the man behind the counter asked. Requests of this type were not all that unusual. "I have a rather striking item over..."

"Death," I said flatly, after gliding silently throughout the store for several minutes. Nothing remotely resembling the urn was in view. The clerk acted as if he'd heard me wrong. "How a society views death is a reflection of how it respects life. If society has no thought for its past it has no thought for the future." I paused and looked around somewhat paranoiacally. "I hope to capture the first, tortured cries of our dying civilization. And with the proper pieces to accent my work, those cries will become screams which cannot be ignored."

Ray looked over to me from the grooming set the man had set out, and, turning the jet-backed hair brush over once, placed it back with the set. "I think she's looking for something a bit less civilized, more tortured." He made a vague gesture with his hand, beating at the air.

The clerk rummaged in a far showcase, finally producing a beautifully carved jet-handled letter opener. The blade was rough in a pre-rust way, but the handle had improved through its use and had become worn to a mellow polish. Still, it would hardly be deadly, let alone tortured. I silently resolved to be more direct in the next store.

By the fifth store we'd settled into a sort of routine; Ray took over all the questioning, and I drifted around as best I could, silent and distant but not so much as to be suspicious.

"A funerary urn," Ray asked the white-haired, somewhat stooped clerk in a store where my skirt stirred up dust in the far corners. Ray had picked up on my air of disdain touched with arrogance, and had polished it to a level of haughtiness that I hadn't seen in anyone since my Ancient History teacher in high school--she who could make it seem that it was a duty of western civilization to worship those who had given us "Art." Any blasphemous opinion to the contrary incurred a twenty minute lecture on the "sin" of artlessness, and what blandness this evil would bring to your life. "A means of destroying the dead yet still keeping them close. A means of disposing of the dead, not gracefully, or peacefully, but with the violence of fire. A wonderful parallel to the possible fate of our entire world, don't you agree?"

The old man looked as if he'd lost the track back at the beginning of Ray's onslaught. Instead of holiday shoppers he was stuck with what must have seemed to be a couple of people two steps from a mental hospital. After a moment comprehension set in. "I have two." He made his way to the back arthritically. From a dimly lit room came the sound of a box dragged and opened, and muttered curses after a sudden fit of asthmatic coughing. He reappeared a minute or two later, carrying two newspaper-wrapped bundles. "There was an estate sale a few weeks ago..." He unwrapped as he explained. "...and these were up for auction. No family left to claim them. The forgotten dead, you could say," he offered.

I suppressed a smile as I looked at the two. One was enameled metal, the other tarnished silver edged with gold. Neither was the one we were looking for. "Gold, simple gold. It must show the misplaced priorities of our culture. Thousands spent on the dead but no money for the living." Ray let out an exasperated breath and attempted to replace a hair that had sprung back to curl from the otherwise smoothly disciplined mass.

The shopkeeper gave a slight, dry laugh and started to rewrap his two finds. "If these were gold, do you think I'd be here in this place, in this dust?" He cleared his throat harshly, while Ray buttoned the upper button on his dark wool

coat and brushed at an imaginary spot of dirt on the lapel. With a gesture of dismissal and a shake of his head the clerk continued, "These are the only two I know of; people don't give them up easily. If you don't want these, then," he shrugged, "good luck with your looking."

* * *

We needed more than his wishes to find the urn. By noon we had covered all the stores we could, and I saw no reason to stay around a crowded city any longer than I had to. As I eased myself into the car, and pulled my skirt in after me, I turned the idea of lunch over in my mind and tried to remember just what there was at home to eat. Shivering slightly from the cold seat, I pulled my dark grey coat in close against me and stared out at the sunlight on the golden lamppost decorations. Up until last night it had been unusually warm and completely snowless. Now it was twenty-two out, and still snowless, which somehow made the cold seem all the worse.

"You seem nervous," I shivered, waiting for the heat to come on.

"Any reason I shouldn't be?"

"Why you shouldn't be?" I dug my hands deep into my pockets, absently twisting a paper cough drop wrapper that was still in the left hand pocket. "Are we back to where we were that summer?"

"Two days ago I find out that you want me to find the remains of a vampire-who-should-have-been. Two nights ago I get a lecture on the dangers of losing contact with your past from a vampire himself! How does that sound to you?" He slowed at a red light and turned right.

I wasn't in the mood for an argument. "Okay, maybe it *is* strange." My voice wasn't convincing.

"No. Don't agree with me. You really can't see just how strange it is." He did his best to accelerate on the uneven winter pavement.

Maybe I had just been around it too long to see what had him so upset. In any case I didn't like the way the conversation was headed--toward getting me to admit that Alexsander and our situation were strange, even to my eyes. "After two weeks that summer you seemed a lot better than this. I would have thought that after a couple years away you'd be even more relaxed than then; not like this."

"Time would heal my fears? You saw the same things I did." He shook his head as if to shake off the memories, then did his best to dodge an unusually bad pothole. "It's not that simple."

We sat in silence as he wound through the maze of detours at a large area of long overdue highway reconstruction. "Yesterday you handed that cross back to me without flinching. I saw what that did to you the last time you held it. You didn't even want it in the house."

"I expected it to hurt, so it did." I saw no harm in honesty, not on this. "Besides, I needed to conquer my own fear, to show it could be done."

"So you could get Alexsander to do the same," he concluded, then probed onward. "How?"

"Logic," I admitted. "Nothing more. I showed him how the cross-panes of the windows, the maltese crosses of the parquet flooring in the foyer had no effect on him, all because he didn't believe that they would. He had trust in me, but it still took time to destroy his fears." I sighed. With all my success in this I hadn't been able to discuss it with anyone. I had wanted to, but I had no one near I could trust. "I still wouldn't pull that thing on him. He may be able to tolerate it, but that doesn't mean that he's comfortable with it. Or that he'd be nice about it."

Somehow what I'd just said had had a reverse effect from what I'd hoped. I had hoped that once Ray knew that Alexi was that much less a monster he'd be more at ease. Now I saw that he seemed even more uneasy about returning to the house. Knowing that he possessed some means of ensuring himself safety from whatever threat he saw in Alexi had left him at some measure of ease. Now I taken away his guarantee of some way of out-powering Alexi, and he didn't like that.

"You've gained your holidays. Now what will you work on next? Winters in the Caribbean? Or trying to talk him into casting reflections?"

His line of questions and its relentless flow was beginning to get annoying. As quick as I could answer them he came up with new ones. After all the time that had passed, he hadn't changed. Hoping to curtail his questioning I answered in simple facts; very plain, perhaps too plain. "I can't change biochemistry. The sun isn't good for *your* skin, even less so for Alexi. Why does all this bother you so much?"

It was like a game of verbal tennis; each of us trading our questions, with an occasional answer. Again he bypassed an answer to a question. "And what are the prospects of a mirror in the foyer?"

I offered no immediate answer. It was one of 'Lexi's attributes that defied scientific explanation.

"It's the one thing you really can't explain, and it's the one thing that can even scare *you*." He looked over at me for a moment, a sarcastically good-natured smile on his face. "Nice to know there's something."

I felt vengeful, and I thought of the cross he'd carried back to Alexi's home. And how he'd seemed to react when he'd found out that it didn't hold the power it had before. I laughed shortly, sharply.

"That goes both ways. You didn't get to see the look on your face when you found out that you no longer had a little piece of security in your pocket. You're here in the bright sun scared; scared of someone who isn't the least bit of danger to you, not tonight, not ever. Alexsander's let go of his fear; too bad you can't do the same."

For a second I thought that he was going to respond, but he stayed silent through the remaining miles of our trip.

We made our way home through a series of snow flurries that had sprung up as we entered the hills. Pretty as they were, I could see sunlight coming through behind them and I knew they wouldn't last. Still, I regretted that Ray had chosen to drive east, risking his car in winter conditions it wasn't built to drive through. The car stopped while I was still in my silent musings; I hadn't even realized that we were home. After our touchy conversation I'd felt it best to keep quiet, not wanting to give him the chance to start a new line of attack. It was well after three, and the low sun was moving close to a spectacular winter sunset, complete with swirling clouds and traces of snow on bleakly brown grass.

* * *

In the northern rooms Alexsander moved with only the slightest care; what natural light did creep in around the closed drapes was pale and held little danger. As Ray and I entered the house I picked up an emotional resonance that I hadn't noticed the night before. It was a distancing, as if he were blocking the intensity of the emotion he wanted me to sense, yet underneath it was the same sense of turmoil that had been there for weeks. His emotions hadn't changed much, but his control over how much he was allowing me to sense was, and I was thankful for that.

For half an hour I'd stood at Alexi's bedside, silently debating whether or not to awaken him. Finally I left the room, carefully closing the door behind me. It was well after sunset, and Alexi's oversleeping distressed me in a distinct yet vague way. As I changed into house-clothes, and removed the thick coat of make-up, I tried not to think of what may have been wrong. Switching on the hallway lamps I tried to remind myself that he had, on other occasions, far overslept his usual waking time.

My mind wandered again, off on a somewhat pleasing, yet somewhat numb set of thoughts, like a series of favorite paintings. They were thoughts that I knew well, from the last few weeks of sleepless nights. After a moment I noticed Ray standing next to me and I broke my trance-like state to look at him.

"Have you broken the news to him yet?" His eyes rested on the heavy wooden door.

"News?" I replied, as the last remnants of the fog cleared from my mind. Pulling the blue plaid shirt closer to my body I tried to squeeze a little more warmth out of the oversized, well-worn flannel.

"Yeah, our little fortune-hunting venture?" He shaped the urn in the empty space between us.

I didn't ask where he'd been for the last hour or two. I knew better, and I knew that I had far better things to do than separate his lies from his half truths, all for something that was probably so trivial.

"No." I folded my arms and took a quick look over my shoulder toward the closed door. Then I smiled and stepped past him. "I was going to leave that to you."

For the briefest moment he hesitated, and I thought I saw fear flicker on his face. But the lights of the old house had dimmed for a second as the heat switched on and it must have been only that. Before he could say anything else I told him the truth. "Alexi hasn't awakened."

"Really funny, Sabri. I spent all day going from one dusty shop to another, with you doing your 'supremely creepy artist' act, only to come up with nothing. Now I'd like to at least let Alexsander know of our progress--or lack of it--because somehow I don't like the idea of having him coming to look for me!" He concluded by crossing his arms indignantly and giving me a very sharp look.

Without comment I turned, walking past Ray. He followed me into the room and stood at my side as I sat on the edge of the bed and picked up Alexi's hand.

For ten minutes I attempted to contact Alexi's mind, trying to awaken him. It was all to no avail; no matter how much I cleared my mind, no matter how much I concentrated I couldn't awaken him. Finally it was too much for me; I dropped his hand and nearly ran out of the room.

* * *

The chill of the glass-walled pillow room was offset by the warmth from the wood stove. The room had originally been a sort of solarium attached to a south-facing wall of the house. Another flurry was passing and I lay back and watched as the tiny flakes landed, then melted on the glass over my head. A part of my mind was trying to make sense of all that had just happened.

"This is one favor that I should never have tried to repay." Ray nudged a large pillow closer to the wall, and sat by my feet. "Forgive me, but when you told me what was missing I should have packed up and headed back west." He drew in a harsh breath and ran a hand through his dark hair. "In fact, I probably should never even have let it get that far."

I gave a twisted smile. "Too late to get out. Besides, I remember a promise you made to us, two and a half years ago." I sat up, folding my knees to my chest and wrapping my arms around them to hold the position.

"So," he said dryly, "*that's* where I made my mistake."

For a moment there was silence between us. Ray stared out the transparent ceiling as flakes sifted on the glass like sand. An errant breeze sent them swirling off into the night.

"What happened up there?" he finally asked.

"I'm not sure myself. 'Lexi won't let me know anything. He's locked me out of his thoughts, and he doesn't even want me to try to follow. He's distanced his mind from mine." I grabbed a wine-colored brocade pillow and slipped it between my knees and my chest, then rested my face on its satiny surface. The attempt to contact Alexi had left me drained of energy, both physically and mentally.

"You can tell that just from holding hands?" Ray watched me in a doubtful, wary manner as he absently grabbed a floral pillow and stuffed it behind his back.

The beginning of a headache was starting behind my eyes. "Yes," was my simple answer. I pressed a cold hand to my forehead and tried to breathe my way past the headache's grip. "Don't ask me the details, but I know."

He sighed again and watched out the windows as the squall passed and the moon

flashed out from behind a thin cloud. "Nice. He retreats to his mind, and leaves me..." He shot a look over to me and revised his statement. "...us--to do his work for him."

"No. He's doing it out of protection for me. He wants to separate me from his emotions, for my sake." I rotated my pillow to a cooler spot and pressed my face to it.

"Damn strange timing."

"He knows that something is being done; that the matter is being taken care of. He has trust in your abilities." My voice was slowing down; a few more minutes and I would be asleep. With Alexi's mind separated from mine I was beginning to feel all the exhaustion of the last few weeks catching up with me. It was barely six and I felt like I could hardly move. I was too tired to even be embarrassed by it.

"He may have too much faith." Ray got to his feet and pushed his pillows away from the stove.

I smiled sleepily and gave serious thought to standing, finally attempting it, with success. "I never thought I'd hear you say something like that. If you really can't get anywhere on this, we'll understand. I know you've tried." I shrugged and steadied myself by leaning onto Ray's arm. "It's weird, I know. I'd like to plead with you, but I really think I can see your side..."

"Save it for tomorrow." He held up one finger on his free hand. "One more night." He untangled my hand from his arm and placed it on the banister, where we now stood. "You're sure you're all right?"

I nodded, then added, "It's the first time in three weeks that I'm free of Alexi's emotions; no more worry to keep me up nights." I stepped up two steps, then remembered something. After digging in my pocket I came up with a set of keys. I almost tossed them to him, then realized they weren't the ones I wanted to give him; I tossed the other set to him.

He stared at them for a few seconds, but I answered his question before he could even ask it. "They're to my Honda. The weather is kind of uncertain and I'd feel better if you took it instead of your 'Vette. I don't much like the idea of you spinning off the road in a snow squall." The last thing I needed was the guilt of knowing he'd died while repaying my favor. And I'd seen what could result from trying to drive a Corvette in a snowstorm.

He pocketed the keys without comment and turned back to the pillow room, saying something about checking the stove for the night. By that time I was to the top of the north branch of the staircase and wasn't able to hear his exact words.

The "blue" bedroom was cold. Something had to be wrong with the heat, but I wasn't going to worry about it tonight. Nor was I going to worry about changing for sleep. I peeled off the cream Dearfoams I'd been wearing and wiggled out of my bra with sleepy acrobatics. Letting it fall to the thick Wedgwood blue carpeting, I then pulled back the heavy layers of comforters and wool blankets. Without waiting for the bed to warm up, I switched off the bedside lamp, and let the darkness overtake me.

* * *

I surfaced out of my dreamless darkness, aware that outside the palest cold light of a winter dawn was lighting the sky. After a moment I heard steps on the stone stairs, and remembered that a closing door had awakened me. Shaking off the haze of sleep, I slipped out into the hallway. Alexsander's door still stood closed, and in my mind I knew that he was in there, though not as unconscious as he had been the night before. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the door of the "green" room close, and heard two objects hit the bed and a few curses muffled by the distance and the door.

"Wake Alexsander," Ray said before I could even get the door open. As I closed the door behind me he held the urn out and I took it. The weight, the design--he'd managed to recover it.

"How?" I turned it over, inspecting every angle. "This is it!"

"Yes. You asked me to take one more night to find it, and if you'd like to try to get Alexsander awake, I think I'll hand it over to him and then just be going." He was inspecting a spot on his leg, about three inches above the outside of his left knee. He had on the same ragged stable clothes as I'd seen him in the other morning, except the fabric below the left knee was visibly darker the the rest.

"You're not going to drive off? Not with that!" I moved around to the far side of the bed, setting the urn on a bookcase. I took a closer look at his leg, as he took off his coat and tucked it carefully under his leg, in a belated attempt to keep the blood off the bedspread. A small hole showed in the front of the pants leg, at an angle that should have placed it as a flesh wound, although a rather nasty one.

"It will take me at least a few minutes to awaken him. It should give you time to get that cleaned up and bandaged. I think there should still be some gauze and tape in the closet in my bathroom."

I didn't wait for his decision, instead turning from the bed. "Wake him!" were his last words to me before I left the room.

As much as I resented his commanding tone I did as he asked, sitting on what would normally have been my side of Alexi's bed. I ran my hand along Alexi's cool cheek, smoothing back some dark hair, then taking his hand and closing my eyes. I heard an uneven step in the hallway, and the door to my room shut. His state of mind had changed, now much more active than it had been the night before. I urged him awake, conveying the need to have him awake, but also a positive sense of success and completion. It took almost fifteen minutes, but finally his eyes opened. I kissed his hand and smiled, relieved that finally I would have him back the way I had had him before the theft.

"Welcome back," I said as he sat up. He gave me a confused stare. "It's Sunday morning, about six-thirty."

He held his arm out and I moved within its comfort, resting my head against him. Part of me was drifting off to sleep again, but part of me also still sensed a deep tension in him, as well as extreme hunger. There was no time to deal with that now, not when I expected Ray to join us at any minute, but sometime during the day I would have to. With even minimal help from me he could make it comfortably through till early that evening when he could get out to the stables.

"You slept well?"

I nodded slightly, and went on in a sleepy half-whisper. "Yeah. You had us so scared last night..."

"You needed rest, and for the last several days we've been on an emotional cycle. My emotions have been upsetting you so." In a slow, absent way he stroked my hair as it fell over my shoulder in its morning disarray. The effect was pleasantly hypnotic in my already sleepy state. I knew of emotional cycling, of how the resonance of an emotion one of us felt could intensify that feeling in the other, and then return to further feed that emotion in the originator. It was dizzying, and had its best applications in pleasurable emotions. With darker emotions it became almost self-destructive.

"I knew that I had done as much as was possible. I kept a loose monitoring of the situation through you, until you were home again." He moved to rise, setting me back against a pile of bed pillows. Wrapping his robe around him more tightly he strode towards the fireplace to see just how dead the fire was. He set about to restarting it, then he returning to the edge of the bed to pick up my once-again-chilly hands. "Is it that cold in here?"

"It's freezing," I said, finally making the connection that I'd missed the day before. Turning up the heat was usually 'Lexi's job, after he had awakened. Since he hadn't awakened yesterday, the heat had never been turned up from the 55 where it stayed while we were asleep. Here in the rooms with the old, lead-paned windows the temperature was at least ten degrees cooler. I shook my head in disbelief and annoyance at my oversight and slid off the bed to go turn up the heat.

"Ray's uncomfortable," I began, grabbing an old sateen comforter from the foot of the bed and pulling it around me as I sat on the bed again. "He wasn't too happy

to learn that he no longer had a way of driving you away." I traced the shape on the bed in response to Alexi's questioning glance. I closed my eyes for a few minutes, knowing that I had more to say, but trying to let an early morning chill pass. "He's been shot, too."

'Lexi turned away from the fire, which was now burning quite brightly. "Is it serious?"

"No. Just a flesh wound, above the knee. From what I could see it looked like it wasn't very bad."

I straightened myself against the pillows as Alexi sat diagonally across from me. In the time that I'd been warming myself he'd changed into "awake" clothes. "Not that he'd ever let you know otherwise," he commented.

I heard steps in the hallway. First I moved to catch Ray, but then stopped myself. He'd been the one so hot to have Alexi awake and then limp off in completion of his part. If he was still in such a hurry he could just come and find us. "No," I replied to Alexi in a contemplative way, expecting Ray any moment. After a moment Alexi looked to the door of the room, which opened as Ray entered with his prize.

Although my hearing was nothing like Alexi's, I caught the faint rustle of the layers of bandaging on his leg, scraping against the clean blue denim he now wore. "This was yours?" he asked Alexi, as he handed over the urn.

Alexi accepted it preciously, reverently running his hands over its elaborate surface. "Where did you...?" he began, breaking off when he realized that the question was hopeless unless he was prepared to force Ray's mind.

Ray stood by the mantel; at Alexi's attempt at a question he looked over to the draped bed, then arranged his damp hair in a way that seemed well practiced and without need of a mirror. He turned his attention back to the fire, and to warming and flexing his injured leg. "Sabri's probably already told you that I'm out of this now."

For a minute it seemed that Alexi had been too lost in thought to have heard Ray's statement. "Yes, certainly." He was still distracted, checking over the urn almost in disbelief.

"I'll catch you later then," he said, more to me, it seemed, than to 'Lexi.

I cast off the sateen comforter and turned to protest. After a night awake searching, and with his injury, his physical condition was not good for leaving, no matter what he might think. I didn't care for the continuing unsettled weather either. His room faced east, and if it was Alexi he feared he could leave the drapes partly open and rest "safely" in the dim daylight. Before I could press my case, Alexsander interrupted.

"No!" His voice was both a command and a statement, though not very much above a loud whisper. Ray paused, perhaps out of curiosity, perhaps to challenge Alexi, and perhaps due to some influence of Alexsander's. Whatever the cause, he stopped by the door and turned once again to face Alexi, walking back almost to my side. For a short time Alexi continued his concentrated, tense inspection. He traced the carvings, then turned it slowly over once, twice, his hands circling the edge of the lid. Then he held it away, never taking his eyes from the urn. Suddenly he brought it to his chest, inhaling violently, his fingernails raking at the lid. Finally, the lid flew off and he locked eyes with Ray. "No," Alexi repeated in a more normal voice. "You shall not leave! You have done nothing for us! I must know *exactly* what happened last night." His eyes were still on Ray as he upended the empty urn over the bed, then threw it down in disgust, not seeming to mind as it bounced off the edge of the bed.

"I did what you asked!" Ray explained patiently, but tersely enough to show that his patience was stretched to its limit.

Swiftly yet carefully he picked up the urn, which now lay at his feet, gave a peek inside and then tossed it onto the center of the bed, where it lay with the shadow over its mouth, giving an illusion of being bottomless as well as empty. "You asked for it back, you have it, just as I found it. How sure are you that it wasn't empty when it was taken? That it hasn't been empty for the last fifty years?"

Ray stood silent as Alexi sought a way of explaining how he could simply know something like that. I understood it. Not only had I seen this ability used by him before, but I was beginning to feel the faintest flickers of it in myself as well. It went beyond any light, easy explanation, and was simply knowing something without any need to ask or check. Similarly, part of me knew, without even seeking to know, that Ray was nowhere near as calm as he would have liked us to believe. Despite his casual stance, he was actually very nervous. It came through as a fear, mixed in origin. I didn't sense him as *scared*, simply feeling fear. There was a difference, I felt, yet I wasn't about to let myself get distracted into the finer points of the definitions.

"It wasn't empty, I assure you." Alexsander broke his gaze on the urn and moved to one of the north-facing windows, drawing back the edge of a drape to briefly gaze at the pale pink sky. "There is a feeling--an echo--a resonance. Call it what you will; it exists, and that's how I knew the urn wasn't empty. And..." He shook his head and broke off, letting the drape fall and pacing the far end of the room.

Ray eased himself to the edge of the bed. Alexi turned away, straightening the positions of a book and a lamp on a corner table. Ray sighed and shifted on the bed, quickly glanced at me and then spoke again. "You want to hold on to someone you loved--I can sympathize with that. But think about what you're asking. You want me to look for ashes--*somewhere* in a city? You're asking the impossible." Ray watched as Alexsander refused to even grace Ray's words with a reply.

"You said that about the urn itself, and you got that back for us," I reminded him, sliding around to sit on the same side as Ray.

"You were lucky--damned lucky. And as you said, you asked me to recover the urn, and now you have it." He moved, as if bracing his leg to stand.

Alexsander acted as if he had heard none of this. "Tell me exactly how you got that. Tell me exactly what you saw. I must know."

"And I must tell?" Ray rose defensively, putting himself in a position where he could reach the door before Alexi would. Alexsander gave Ray a rather offhand glance as he returned the book to a shelf.

"I believe you know your options."

"Some 'options'! I tell you, or you take over my mind and force me to tell."

"Not unless that's my only choice. Consider how self-defeating that would be. Yes, I'd gain information, but unless you're willing to cooperate I would have to force you along every step of the search. In the end it would be counterproductive for me to force you, to threaten you, or even to lie to you."

Alexsander's words were not as reassuring to Ray as he would have liked them to be, and although I saw Alexi's reason for not following this possibility, I could also see that he was closing himself off to a potentially powerful means of gaining information. On the other hand, he may also have realized that if Ray felt at ease, he would have an easier time trying to push Ray's mind into revealing what he knew.

Ray limped across the room to lean against a tapestry-covered chair. He motioned as if to speak, but then hesitated. As he hesitated, a small log burned through and sent a shower of sparks upward. Finally he spoke his carefully chosen words.

"By early yesterday evening, I had reason to believe that the urn hadn't left drug circles. This morning I tracked it to a particular person. I trailed him to a deal. That--for its gold content--was traded in the deal. From there I was able to bring it home to you."

I desperately wanted to know just how he had gotten it from the dealer. I couldn't see Ray transporting or trading the drugs, nor could I see him taking it by any sort of force, not with the weapons those dealers carried, and how freely they used them. If I asked him, and worded my question poorly, I knew I might never find out the answer. I pushed that question aside in my mind and instead asked a second question. "So that was traded in the deal? They can't have thought it that valuable."

"I don't think they ever considered the value of the piece. They may have

thought it contained drugs."

"You saw that much detail?" Alexi asked.

"How much could I see? I was almost a hundred feet away, looking into a street light!"

Alexsander raised an eyebrow, as if in disbelief of Ray's quick answer, but pressed on anyway with his questions. Ray didn't seem as upset or distressed as he had been when 'Lexi had "persuaded" his mind. Maybe it was that 'Lexi wasn't pushing for control, only for some answers. "You know more detail. Please tell us."

Ray paused long enough to make me think he'd seen through Alexi's subtle approach, and to some extent he had. "The dealer I was trailing got into a car, talked with someone in there for a minute or two, then handed him the urn and took something from him. The one behind the wheel looked at it, then dropped it. They argued. There was a gunshot, the driver leaped out, threw the urn back into the car, and ran off. Once I knew the way was clear, I ran over, grabbed the urn, and got out of there before the police could arrive."

Alexi turned and walked back to the window. Ray gave me an odd look; perhaps he had realized what Alexi had done, even though now it was too late for Ray to resist. He seemed unsure, almost as if he weren't certain if he'd really answered or had only thought of it. The last Ray had known, Alexi had been pressing him for details; now he stood silent, his attention definitely not on Ray any more. Ray's eyes traveled from Alexi to me, but I could think of nothing to say that would help the situation. Abruptly he turned and left the room. A short time later I heard the echo of the main door closing.

"It didn't work."

"I did try." He turned on the table lamp, rubbing at a spot of dust on the shade.

"Now what?" I forced myself off the bed. As tired as I was, it was so close to my usual waking time that I knew I wouldn't fall back to sleep easily. Maybe in the afternoon.

Alexsander just shook his head silently and walked back to the side of the bed. "I can't think on that now. Other things must come first; things more important than that."

I felt his meaning before my mind fully understood.

* * *

I slid back to a warm spot against the pile of pillows. Alexi's feeding left me with a slight chill and a weak feeling that had more to do with the aftereffects of the pleasure than it did with any loss of blood. "He lied, 'Lexi, he had to have! What he said he saw--his wound--that wasn't from a hundred feet away!"

"I know," Alexi replied, "but if he could lie like that under my influence, then I knew it would be useless to press further." He was staring at one of the heavy drapes, and at the thin trickle of morning light that was leaking onto the north wall. Given the time of year, the diffuse light was more a curiosity than a danger, especially from where we sat.

"What if he's gone for good?"

He turned back to look at me. "Then I suppose that from here we'll have to finish it on our own."

I couldn't quite believe him--not only was he not giving up, something I would hardly expect him to do, but now he wanted to search for something so hopeless, far more hopeless than our original search had been. I laughed in a way more hopeless than derisive as I pulled the heavy comforter back up around my shoulder. "Where would one start looking for ashes, especially in a city like that? Should we start in dumpsters in alleys, or go straight to the land fill?"

"There is another way to know where they would be." He tucked the other end of the quilt up around me and rose to pull the light-leaking drape fully closed.

"Ray is gone, 'Lexi." I wiggled myself deeper into the pillows and listened to

the wind outside as the old windows rattled and creaked in the cold. "And I know that this 'resonance'--it can't be that strong?"

"I cannot rely on that feeling, I know that. I also know what he said was not all true."

I shook my head. "You only know what was in his mind. He's tricked you in that way before. This is far too sensitive an issue to risk with that type of information."

"No," 'Lexi protested, sitting beside me on the bed. "I know he was hiding something. What was in his mind, what he didn't say, was what I myself saw last night."

I sat up, staring at him in disbelief. "You followed him?! 'Lexi, that was too dangerous! You promised me you'd never be that careless! If you were seen there, and blamed for anything that went on..."

"Seen?" he countered. "By whom at that hour, in that neighborhood? Some drug dealer or some prostitute?"

"What if the police had the same lead that Ray had? They know you from when we picked up the things they recovered. Any connection with what happened last night could completely ruin our chances of their cooperation." I slipped off the bed and walked silently over the thick layers of carpet, trying to think of what might happen if Alexi could be placed at the scene.

"I have no fear of being recognized. I'm not that careless anymore."

After a moment I realized what he was really saying. "Alexsander, you promised me that you'd never do something like that! That's just as risky. What if someone saw..."

"No one was around to see--I was sure of that before I changed form. It was simply the easiest way to cover that distance and be nearly invisible."

I gave a weak gesture of disapproval. "You promised me." I saw his reasons, but I also knew that if he started getting back to his old ways it could be quite difficult for him to break those habits again. "Where do we start looking for the ashes?"

He smiled slightly at my change of subject. "I do not think we have to worry about the ashes."

"You cleaned them up after Ray was shot?" I asked hopefully. 'Lexi only sighed and looked troubled. "Then all this argument with Ray was for nothing?"

"No," he said very carefully. "The ashes no longer exist as such, at least from what I saw last night, and from what I was able to perceive in Ray's mind."

I grabbed one of the smaller chairs that stood by the wall and pulled it onto the rug, sliding into it as my mind tried to connect Alexi's hints. Too much was happening with too little sleep for me to follow all his oblique references to his vampiric abilities. "Stop it, 'Lexi! Just tell me--do I have to worry about risking my life in that city to recover what you lost? Or can I just go back to bed knowing this is all over?"

"No, I still need your help. What I saw last night leads me to believe that at least part of what Ray said earlier was true. The man who shot Ray most likely believed that the urn contained drugs. When he found out it did not, he killed the man who had cheated him. As Ray ran up to the car, the killer shot Ray in the leg. As Ray fell, he returned the fire, killing the man. The ashes had been spilled on the seat, and a great deal of blood was now spilled on top of them. After Ray was shot, I watched to see if he was badly hurt, or if he seemed well enough to get himself home safely. Ray was able to retrieve the urn and make his escape, and by the time I got to the car there were no ashes, very little blood, and sirens were getting very close."

"But where did they... No! It can't be!" This was what I'd considered telling Ray about back in the hospital, but I'd figured it would only scare him off; besides, I never really thought it was anything more than some bit of superstitious nonsense. "Then she must be alive!"

"Alive? Yes, as alive as I am. I'd never dared try this; in all the years of loneliness after her death I held this possibility as a hope of a future with her,

but I never had the resources at my disposal. Through these last several years that I've spent with you I haven't given it even a moment's consideration. Now that I don't need her, I have her back."

He turned and looked at me with a painful mix of emotions--sadness, a touch of fear and quite a bit of pity, all for me, I suddenly realized. Finally I comprehended the whole situation, and for a moment it seemed as if nothing in that shadowed room existed except for me and Alexsander; my only thoughts were on what this meant for me. For the last few years the only way I'd seen my future was with Alexi, forever. Suddenly things had become very complicated--someone whom we both had thought was gone forever could be back. Alexi still loved her; I'd known that, and I'd accepted that. But I'd also accepted that she was gone, and so had he. Now that she was "alive" again, which would Alexi choose? And if I came up on the losing end, just what would he do with me, now that I had been irrevocably changed towards being a vampire? I didn't want to consider life without him. At that moment I wanted nothing more than to be in his arms, and to hear him say that no matter if she was again "living," her place was not with him. But I knew that to get any closer to him than I was now would just tear my heart all the more.

Alexi must have sensed my pain; certainly he was also torn by this development. "Sabri, please realize that I must find her; I am responsible for her being here. Imagine awakening almost fifty years in the future, in a strange country, all alone; she's very frightened and very confused. And very dangerous. She very much needs me and my help."

"I do understand," I managed to say somehow, barely daring to even look at him. "But it's daylight right now, and there is nothing we can do for the moment." It was as much a question as a statement. There were things that needed doing in the stable before I could let myself rest again, plus I was incredibly hungry. The room that for so long had been such a place of comfort and pleasure now seemed horribly confining. I left my chair suddenly, as if staying in it another second might keep me there forever. I left the room to do what needed doing, suddenly scared for my future and not sure whether I loved Alexsander for his sympathy, or hated him for ever allowing this to happen.

* * *

When I returned to the house I was thoroughly cold and smelled of horses. I wondered, not for the first time, why such wonderful animals had to smell so bad. I'd been thinking about things like that a lot for the last couple of hours, keeping my mind off the situation. Now, as I thawed in the hot shower, I allowed the tears to catch up with me. After, I hoped, I would feel better and be able to think more clearly.

It didn't quite work that way. When I'd first started working a shift different from Alexi's normal hours I had taken this room, loving the way the brass of the bed and furniture glowed against the wood paneling. With the calm blues of the bedspread, drapes and carpet, it had always seemed pleasantly quiet and removed from the rest of the world. Now it seemed too removed, the blues seemed cold, and it looked artificial, more like a hotel room than a room that I had lived in for the last two and a half years. "You're back?" I asked as I heard footsteps in the hall outside my room. I didn't need to look to see that it was Ray. I turned as he entered the room.

"Alexi's asleep?" he asked.

I only nodded. My mind was still turning over what Alexi had revealed and all it meant to me and my life. Maybe, just maybe Alexi's feelings had misled him. There was a chance...

"Ray, what did you see last night? When Alexi asked you earlier you kind of...blanked..." I was never a good liar, and I hoped he wouldn't be able to see through this. "Could the ashes have been spilled in the car? Did you realize the urn was empty?"

"Getting shot has a way of screwing up your memory." He paused a moment. "I'm

not sure I remember *what* I saw." Finally he looked back at me. "Besides, how could I see ashes in the shadows like that? I don't have Alexi's eyes," he said defensively.

I risked one more question: "Was there blood on the urn when you took it from the seat? I need to know!" If he hadn't wiped off blood, if there had been no blood on the seat of the car, then Alexi's suspicions could be true, and...

"What does blood have to do with the ashes?" Ray asked, seeming a bit annoyed with my questions. "Besides making looking for them even more impossible?"

"We're not looking for ashes anymore. The situation is different now--very different--from what it was when I first asked you here."

I looked up at him, my eyes probably red and puffy from my crying, my hands nervously twisting the cord of my black sweat pants until it painfully cut into my hands, and my mind realizing what action I would ultimately have to take. Ray sat at the desk by the computer; never had he seen me in this type of state, even with what we'd gone through before. Still, he sat silently, eyes following me, awaiting my explanation.

"What do you know of the results of destroying a vampire?" I asked him, picking up a stained glass box that Alexi had given me and setting it carefully on the bed. "About what is left?"

Ray shrugged his shoulders and looked confused. "A body if it's young, dust if it's old. Did Alexsander just go 'poof' while I was gone?"

I ignored his question. "Dust--or ashes."

"You said that Alexi's lover had died and been cremated. Sounds like she was never really a vampire."

"She would have been, if that hadn't happened." I sat on the bed, looking in the box at the various bits of jewelry that it held, and wondering what would be the best way to tell him the rest. "First we needed your help to find the urn."

"Now you want to find ashes?" he asked.

I shook my head, closing the small box. "There are no ashes anymore. They were on the seat when two men were left bleeding to death. There...are...no... ashes...any...more." I gave these last words quiet emphasis, and waited for his reaction if he figured it out.

He took his eyes off me and stared at the floor for a moment, perhaps reviewing the previous night's events. "Now we need to find a person," I added quietly.

He ran a hand through his hair and then stood up. "No, Sabri--*you're* looking for a person; Alexsander is looking for a person. The favor has been repaid."

"We have to find her, Ray. I don't care how you feel about 'Lexi, about having to work with someone like him, but can you at least think of me? I don't want to believe this has happened--trust me. I hope with all my heart that this hasn't happened, that this is some false perception of Alexsander's. *I* have to try to find her, if only to try to prove that she *doesn't* exist.

"And if she exists?"

"I don't know." I shook my head as if trying to stop that reality. I took a framed photo from beside the bed and folded it, setting it next to the box. "I knew Alexsander loved her, yes, but I knew that as part of his *past*! Now, now..."

"Now where does that leave you?" he finished for me, putting away the car keys he'd dug out just minutes before. "Who will he..."

"I'm not forcing him into that choice! Once she's found I'll have to leave. Staying would be cruel to him, to her, and even more so to me." He looked to the stuff I set on the bed, realizing that I was already starting to pack.

"Going back home?" He picked up an oddly shaped evening hat from the bed and inspected the beadwork. I'd found it while cleaning out a room in the house and had been pleased that it had survived from the early forties in perfect shape.

"No, at least not for long. It's too close to here; I can sense too much of his emotions at that range. It would be too uncomfortable. Farther is better. I've been banking my paychecks these last few years; I've got my own money, my own car. It will be all right."

"No. It won't be. Not until you're back with him. You'd be lost without him.

In the past three years you've changed. You're more and more like him, like them. You told me you'd change whether he was there or not. I think that if you leave him, you'll really lose it."

"I can handle it, Ray." I brushed past him and grabbed some technical books off one of the bookshelves, adding them to the growing pile on the bed. The *Technical Manual of the American Association of Blood Banks* lay there like a sick joke, given our topic of conversation.

"No, you won't be able to. Someday you'll slip more to his side, toward being one of his kind. Alone. Then what?" He followed me to where I was still sorting books.

I stared at him for a moment. He was right, I realized, as I caught myself automatically evaluating his emotions. He was a little more difficult to read than most people, but I could feel that his concern was genuine. But still, I knew staying was out of the question. I continued pulling items and thought that maybe if he had such concern for me I might be able to get him to stay to help us. "I think we're wasting our time with this argument."

He took the hint. "You seemed unsure as to whether what Alexsander sensed was real."

"There's a possibility that he may want to believe this, and that what he's feeling is the result of his own emotional upset and hunger. I'd like to believe that too, except he saw what happened."

Ray stared at me. "What?"

I sighed, then went into my explanation. "Alexsander followed you last night. I didn't even know about it until this morning. He may have thought you could lead him to the urn; also, knowing where you were going he probably feared for your safety. At least that was the sense I had when he told me. After you escaped, he looked into the car to see if any of the ashes might have been spilled. He must have felt the change that had happened. When he looked into the car there were no ashes--and almost no blood. He never really thought that this could happen, but it has."

He shifted in annoyance and gave me a strained look. "When I left last night you insisted that Alexi was resting." Moving away from the bookcase, he gave a disbelieving shake of his head. "And when I got back here this morning, Alexsander's car was here. If he had stayed to look in that car he couldn't have gotten back ahead of me."

I threw down his denial. "I really don't think he used a car for this. It would have been faster for him not to. I think you know what I mean."

He made it to the door before I could speak again. "Please remember Ray, he needs our help. He's as unprepared for this as we are. And if it all happened as Alexsander said it did, then it might be best to use today to rest."

* * *

I didn't bother to check up on Ray; he could make his own decisions, I thought, and I didn't need to risk another confrontation over Lexi's situation, or, even worse, risk his pity over mine. Throughout the day I kept packing, trying without great success to keep our past out of my present.

Then you accept what I am? You are not frightened by me?"

I gave a disgusted sort of laugh. "Do I have much of a choice?"

"Then you are very brave to sit there so calmly. If you are telling the truth."

"Or very foolish," I replied quickly, with a half smile and a raised eyebrow.

He leaned back in his chair and gave a smile that I would soon enough come to realize was usually the closest he came to laughing.

In reaction to this I glared at him sharply, sorely showing that beneath my apparently mature exterior I was still an insecure sixteen year

old girl. I had mistakenly assumed that he was insulting me.

He shook his head slightly. "Forgive me, it is only your style, your spirit; they remind me of someone else I once knew." He watched me for a few seconds and then, without warning, smoothly leaned toward me and took the lavender out of my hand. Brushing back my hair he slipped the flowers behind my right ear. Once done he quickly settled back in his chair.

I set down the small box I'd put some fragile items in. *Memories,* I thought, *won't help you now.* Whether I felt like it or not, what I would need to face tonight was food, not a replay of my first night of conversation with 'Lexi. Somehow it had gotten late, too--the shadows outside were long, and the light on the bare, gray trees was the orange of a winter sunset.

Walking through the wide hallway I noticed that the heat was on, as well as the dozen or so small wall lamps that created crisscrossing shadows as I walked along. Well, I thought, Alexsander hasn't been able to sleep either.

The large kitchen seemed even warmer, not just from heat, but from the scent of food. Looking to the table I saw that my first thought had to be wrong. Alexsander had learned my food preferences quite a while ago, and despite his own tastes considered it his duty to see that I ate well, often starting meals while I was still on my way home from work. A close inspection, though, showed that this wasn't Alexi's doing. Although the seafood concoction was one I was known to favor, it rested over pasta, something I went out of my way to avoid. Taking a quick taste on my way to the fridge to get something to drink I was again confused. Alexi was the only person who would ever put something over pasta that didn't contain even the slightest hint of garlic. Ray entered as I waited for the soda to stop fizzing, still idly puzzled over the out-of-sync meal.

"Have you seen Alexi?" I asked. I had a few ideas of where he might have been, but I wanted to see Ray's reaction.

"He was on his way in when I came back. He said something about being glad that I was back so soon, that we would have to move fast this evening."

Alexsander must have started our dinner and then gone to find something for himself, leaving Ray to finish and never telling him of my odd dislikes. The look on Ray's face as he tasted the sauce confirmed my suspicion, and I gave a slight smile. "Missing something?"

"Not considering the cook. Actually, it's better than I would have expected. It's just a little different."

"In a normal person, chemicals in garlic speed the turnover of red blood cells by speeding the destruction of old cells. If your cells are healthy and reproducing properly it can be a benefit, but if most of your cells aren't fresh, and you can't make new ones, the effect isn't very pleasant. Alexi can absorb these chemicals through his skin as well as through the air."

Ray nodded. "You've been doing a lot of research on him. Abilities, needs, general biochemistry and physiology..."

What he was reciting were the titles of computer files listing the results of research on Alexi, files that I'd taken care to hide with a series of oblique passwords. At least I now knew how he'd spent his afternoon. "Why did you dig so deep into my system?"

"You gave me some hints a few days ago that you were investigating him in this way. I felt that if I had to take the risk of helping the two of you with the rest of this, I should at least know what you've found out. Some of it may be important to what we have to do. I knew from before that you kept computer records of what's gone on between the two of you, and that made your computer the logical place to start."

"But you didn't start on *my* computer. I mean, that information is only on the computer downstairs--that would appear to be the last place for my private information to be."

"Top of the line blood chemistry analyzer, cell counter and microscope in a private home? Nothing unusual about that..." He gave a sarcastic laugh.

I forced myself to eat, even managing to swallow some of the pasta. I also tried to force a change in topic. "This morning you seemed quite sure that you would be gone by now. Now you're talking about being prepared enough to help us?"

Once again he countered a question with a question. "Where do you think she is?"

"I'm not sure--Alexi would know, he'd feel it. She's probably still in the city, probably not far from where this happened."

"And I don't think that she's about to come looking for Alexsander. Nor can I really see the two of you running around a city like that, in an area like that." He laughed again and shook his head. "Not the two of *you*."

I'd eaten about as much as I dared; I was too nervous to risk anything more. After a moment's consideration I put my dinner remains down for the cats and then tried to find Alexi. I relaxed and tried to form an image of what was around him.

As I walked to the ground floor lab room I knew that Ray was following me, but declined a confrontation. After setting everything up I'd shown Alexi the operation of the equipment. He'd learned it quickly and even seemed to know much of the biological principles behind the tests. Just how much of that knowledge was from before I knew him and how much was from leaving him home each day with access to my texts and manuals I wasn't sure. Certainly, I'd thought, he must have filled his time all these years with something.

The closing of the door echoed down the hallway just as I turned the corner. "Everything's all right?" I asked as I reached his side.

"All is fine. I had something started that needed finishing." He turned away from the door and embraced me. Ironically, Alexi's distress had eased to a tolerable level for me, yet my own was now just as brutal to me as Alexi's had been before. Relax, a cynical part of my mind said as he kissed my lips, this may be your last one.

"It's already five-thirty," he said, releasing me yet keeping an arm around my shoulders. "There's quite a bit I need to go over with you and Ray."

"We can talk in the car." Ray walked carefully through the unlit corridor, favoring his injured leg. "We've already lost almost two hours of darkness."

"I didn't think you were that eager to go on this little 'quest'."

"I'm not," he replied, returning Alexi's sharp smile. "I'm only eager to get it over with."

"Then we'll meet at the garage in fifteen minutes; Sabri's not dressed to leave yet. Remember," he said to me as I unwound myself from his arm, "you'll probably be out most of the night in a rather unsavory part of the city. Ray may want to change as well. I have my own things to prepare."

As usual, my little bathroom had warmed up nicely when the heat had been turned on, and, as usual, I went in there to change clothes. I took off the two rings I'd been wearing and set them in the dish on the windowsill; they were too valuable to wear around tonight. As I turned to grab my cotton lycra undershirt I caught a glimmer in my reflection in the mirror; I undid the clasp and let the gold chain slide into my hand.

"I need your help."

His exposed skin was peeling, a lot like the way that sunburned skin peeled, except that instead of losing one layer he was losing several. His dark brown hair had been bleached to a near white. Deep lines were traced over his face; on his hands wrinkles of skin fell over knotted joints.

He reached out to me and I jumped away to escape his touch. His appearance was too unreal.

"I'm glad it's you here and not one of the others. I heard you, but I didn't dare go near." He looked up at me and I shivered. "The sun has set?" he stated more that asked. "I feel I can trust you; you must help me up, help me home." I started forward but then hesitated. "I promise you a full explanation once I am safe."

I looked at the ring on the chain. I had refused to wear it on my hand as I felt it was too valuable to repeatedly subject to the chemicals, germicides and glove powder that I encountered daily. Alexi had given it to me a year ago, telling me that he would not allow what had happened to his last lover happen to me. No one would dare override the wishes of a husband should anything happen to his wife....

No, I can't leave it, I thought, holding the odd necklace over the dish. No matter how things may have changed, my heart hadn't changed on this. Alexsander had trusted me enough to reveal what he was, and then, six years later, to make a promise like this. I'd risk keeping it with me. Finally I threw on my other layers and tucked the necklace into a deep pocket in the old coat I was wearing.

* * *

There was snow on the ground; it was falling softly, but steadily enough to tell me that it wasn't just a passing squall like the other night. Alexsander slipped the Range Rover into a lower gear and dropped our speed even more as we came around to the steep down side of the next hill. "She won't be the easiest person to catch up with." He braked carefully for the sharp turn.

Ray spoke. "Sabri had said something about you knowing of her location by some mental connection."

"That's more of a feeling--it will be stronger the closer we get. It's weaker now that she's had a chance to feed." He looked over at me for a second. "Yes, she's had that. And I have very strong reason to believe that it was human as well. On the news today there was mention of two men who were brought to your hospital, Sabri. One was dead already, and one died soon after arrival. They were both attacked by what the police believe was a pit bull. If they analyze the fur I'm certain they will find that it was no dog."

"If they analyze it by DNA they'll find it's more human than animal," I returned.

"With results like that they'll just call it a contaminated specimen and throw it out. I don't think it's any danger," Ray put in.

"No," Alexi replied, "but her actions are very disturbing, and very dangerous. I won't be in danger, but there can be no splitting up to search for her. And I don't want to risk the chance of more killings--she has to be found tonight."

"And once we've found her, then what? It won't be easy to convince someone like that to take a little ride with us." Ray looked to the empty leather seat next to him, no doubt afraid that he'd be stuck next to her on the ride home.

"She should be very psychologically vulnerable--due to her newness to this life, to the confusion she's in. She should also remember me. Words and soothing her mind should be enough to subdue her."

"And if that fails?"

"Then we'll resort to what's in that bag," he said, indicating my old backpack which he'd thrown in before we'd left and which now lay at my feet. I opened it and took out a few of the odd items. A rope braided of an odd fiber, a length of heavy chain from which hung the plain silver cross that we'd worked with to break Alexi's fear. A syringe, needle and capped tube which could only have come from the refrigerator in the lab room.

I knew it contained a concentrated form of a plasma extract, a substance that could take the place of at least three-quarters of Alexi's feeding, if I could just get a steady supply.

Ray looked over my shoulder at the odd assortment. "You're sure these will work?"

"There is little reason to doubt they will."

"You put this bag together yourself, right?"

"Yes. But a year ago I could not have done it on my own, not without some risk." He looked over at me and then turned his attention back to the road. "She will believe fully in their power."

The smell from the rope hit me. Alexi must have gone out early this evening and combed the woods around for wild garlic plants, the only way to get them with stems still attached.

"Once you get her?" I forced myself to ask.

"I'm not sure. She should have been eased into this life, not thrown into it so violently, in such isolation. It's damage that must be undone if she is ever to function on her own. That may take time. It's the tracking that I worry about: she'll have all my abilities, and she seems much freer about using them than I am. I can keep up with her, but the two of you will be at a definite disadvantage." He paused for a moment, and then added, "Yet I knew that neither of you would ever agree to stay home."

* * *

"Turn right!" 'Lexi suddenly insisted. He'd given the driving over to Ray after a few near misses while his attention was more on the feeling than the intersection.

"It's one-way," Ray protested. "I'll have to circle."

"She's very close--somewhere." Alexi's words trailed to a whisper. We'd circled this block once before, but Alexi had had us circle a few others to be sure that this was where the feeling was the strongest. Light snow still fell, spinning down in silence and giving a deceptively peaceful look to the area around us. The buildings that rose around us looked abandoned, but probably weren't.

"Stop!" Alexi's next words cut my wandering thoughts. "That one!" He hopped out of the car as Ray brought it to a stop. The building before us was weathered brick, with crumbling stone fancywork around the entrance. "Stay here," he told me. "Keep Ray with you. I'll need you both when I return with her."

Ray took a limping step forward and grabbed Alexi by the shoulder. "I didn't come all this way to get left outside."

"No! I have to track her by blood scent--the scent of the blood from her kills, things she's brought back there. If you come along, even the scent from your wound could be a distraction. Please, having the two of you here, prepared, is the best help." He shook off Ray's hand and ran off toward the building, hesitated a moment and then chose to enter through the door.

"So much for the 'only when invited' theory," Ray observed.

"He never told me if he had a problem with that." I pulled my coat in closer and then shook snow from my gloves. "On the other hand, if the place isn't occupied..."

"When are you leaving?" Ray looked around, cautiously uncomfortable with the area.

"As soon as I can think of something to tell my family. The truth is certainly out of the question."

"Or as soon as you can think of how to tell Alexsander?"

He'd hit close with that one. I was dreading telling Alexsander of my intentions more than I was dreading the lies I'd have to tell to my parents. He should understand what I had to do, I thought, but I didn't like to hurt him like that. Or break our promise. I felt the side of my coat, feeling the reassuring lump of the necklace and ring.

"I can't say that I'm looking forward to that." I watched the building Alexi had entered. "How do I tell him without hurting him?"

"After all this you're worried about *him*?" Ray shook his head. "Sometimes I think you're trying for sainthood."

I didn't get to tell him my reasons, or of what I carried in my pocket. As I sought words, Ray made a low cry of disbelief. Above us on the fire escape a woman appeared, her back to us, wrapped in a man's black coat, bare-legged and taking no notice of the cold metal underfoot. She took a step backward, pressing against the low metal railing, keeping her eyes on the closed window that led inside. A moment later Alexsander appeared between her and the window, reaching across the narrow

space, grabbing her shoulder and coming up with nothing as she dematerialized again. For a second she disappeared totally, her mist-like form blending with the snow from this distance. She landed in human form. Alexi then jumped after her, landing at the spot where she'd been only a second before; then he, too, was up, running after her. I grabbed the backpack and followed with Ray, running as fast as we could over the uneven, slippery ground.

"Stay back!" were Alexi's harsh words to us as we came around to an alley two buildings beyond where we'd started. To her he spoke softly, moving close enough to brush some of her waist-length hair out of her face, to pull her ragged coat closed over the worn, half-buttoned flannel shirt she wore beneath it. He spoke in the soothing tones he usually reserved for calming frightened animals. Her dark eyes stared through him, hardly registering the step he took toward her, forcing her back against the brick wall. Without breaking out of the low, hypnotic tone, he spoke to us. "I'm trying to gain control over her mind."

"So she won't disappear again?" muttered Ray, taking the pack from me and opening it silently, readying himself for whatever Alexi would need from him.

"Yes." He gently took her hands in his. "Give me the chain," he asked, again not breaking the soothing chant.

'Lexi took the chain from Ray, wrapping it carefully around his own hands before starting to wrap it around hers. He wrapped it around once, in one smooth movement; as he unwound the rest of the length from his own hands a tail of chain swung free, clattering loudly against a rusting garbage dumpster. The sharp sound broke the hypnotic spell he'd woven on her; she pulled her hands free of the loose chain and dove for a space between the dumpster and Alexi. Ray blocked her, grabbing onto her coat and swinging her against the side of the dumpster. Sobbing in frustration she lashed out at him, the nails of one hand ripping through the fabric of his jacket, her other hand slashing him across the face and neck. He jumped back, stumbling to the ground as I reached for the chain again. She leapt over him and started back the way we'd first come. Several steps away she paused. Wiping her nails on the shirt she wore, she must have caught the scent on her hands. She licked her nails and turned back to face Ray, taking two steps toward him, realizing where the sharp scent was coming from. I moved quickly, without thought of how futile my move would be, and fortunately Alexi stepped between me and his dazed lover before she could reach me, or get by me to get Ray. "No! This I cannot allow you!" It was a tone I recognized; again he was trying to reach through to her on a mental level. She hesitated again, eyes jumping from me to Ray to Lexi, frozen in her confusion, or perhaps by some input of Alexi's mind. Suddenly she turned from us, and with a cry of frustration ran back the way we'd come, the tattered tails of her shirt fluttering in the snowy air.

Alexi quickly knelt by Ray. "Those are only scratches--not bites?"

Ray nodded in confirmation. Blood was flowing freely down his face and neck, soaking into the collar of his jacket.

"I can't let her vanish again," 'Lexi said, turning to me. "I can't let her get away, not when we're this close. Take the wagon and follow us."

"How?" I asked, helping Ray to his feet. "It's tough enough to see you in this snow. If you have to change again to keep up with her..."

He stepped forward again and kissed me quickly. "Just feel; go by your heart. I'll do my best to guide you." And suddenly he was gone.

I picked up the dirty coat Ray had pulled off her. "Can you run back to the car?" I asked. "We don't have much time before this link is too stretched to be any good."

* * *

I started the engine and turned the heat in the car up all the way. I'd given my coat to Ray to get him out of his own, which was damp and sticky with his blood. "I think you forgot what we're tracking," I said as I dug down into the backpack. The extract and syringe had been wrapped in a clean cloth--cleanliness would mean little to the vampire that received it. I quickly wiped at the scratches. They

ranged from deep gouges at their start to light traces at their ends. "An unarmed female vampire isn't as helpless as an unarmed human female."

"I don't think I'll forget that." He pressed the cloth against the side of his face. "Don't lose track of them."

"I haven't." I buckled my belt and put the car in gear to pull away from the curb. "You'd better buckle up, too. This could get rough." Two more lefts, then another circle around a block. For a second I caught a glimpse of two figures running; still she had the lead, somehow. Whether she had had a lead or not shouldn't have mattered by this point; Alexi had longer legs and should have had a better reserve of energy. As he once again closed in I saw a possible answer. She stumbled over something hidden under the snow, and before Alexi could reach her in her moment of distraction she vanished again, and a second later so did he.

"South! At least that's what he's sending me."

"They're going to hit the interstate."

I headed for an underpass. "They're going to run out of land."

I raced the green light, making it in time but feeling a little slide as I made the sharp corner. I followed the beach road for about half a mile and then pulled off the road into a parking lot, turning to face the cold water. "They'll be here," I said to Ray's sharp look.

"Will you forgive me if I try not to believe any of this?" He pulled the cloth away from his face. Fortunately the deepest part of the facial scratches was lost in his hair.

"I can forgive you, but you're going to have to live with those souvenirs she gave you. Those neck scratches look pretty nasty." I shut off the lights and adjusted the heat to a more comfortable level.

"Not as bad as it could have been, I suppose--the last two men she met ended up with their throats ripped by fangs." He grabbed the backpack once again as two shadowy figures appeared on the beach, then hesitated a moment with his hand on the door handle. "Maybe she likes me."

I threw his joke back at him. "Or maybe you're just not her type."

I grabbed the bag back from him and ran ahead to the sand. Across the harbor the sky glowed pink from the lights on the docks, and the hulking forms of the oil tanks were barely visible through the snowy air.

Alexi took a step forward, and in almost the same motion she took a step backward, hitting the packed, damp sand of the tidal area. Again he began his rhythmic, soothing monologue; her dark eyes looked from him to the slapping water behind her. The water should be no danger, I thought. I'd seen Alexi enter the pond at home to rescue a hat of mine; their tolerance of the cold would actually be an advantage in this. Yet as I watched her I wondered if his ability may have been due to the strength of age; or she may not have known the water didn't hold the same danger for her as for a normal human. Once again 'Lexi seemed to have her trapped.

"No, Ray!" he said without taking his eyes from her. "Give the chain to Sabri--if you come any closer your presence will only be a distraction."

"The scent," I clarified for Ray, making a general scratching motion at my face and trading the bag for the chain he held. Alexsander took another step as I approached; now they both stood ankle deep in the cold, dirty salt water. She shuddered for a second, letting out a thin whimper before backing up another step and starting to splash into a run. I tossed the chain to 'Lexi who caught it and ran straight for her. He reached her in three steps and tackled her in the foamy muck. This time he seemed to have success at keeping control over her mind; she didn't try another vanishing escape even as he kept her face down in the water while he chained her hands behind her.

Alexi pulled her to her feet and told me to go back to the car. He was anxious to leave, that I already felt--whether it was a large city or not, there was a risk of discovery and there simply was no easy way to explain a half-dressed, crazed woman in chains. Ray sat beside me in front, not taking any chances that he'd be stuck in back with her.

"Having fun yet?" I asked him as 'Lexi paused long enough for his old lover to

vomit the sea water she'd swallowed while he'd chained her. As he reached the car I got out to open the door for him, his hands busy trying to restrain her through her struggles. Once she reached the door she dropped to her knees, throwing back her head and shrieking in protest. Immediately 'Lexi dropped beside her, clamping a hand over her mouth to solve the immediate danger, then resuming his words, as well as stroking her cheek and jaw to try to relax her. I looked around; her screams had probably been lost in the sounds of the highway but this area was routinely patrolled, storms or not. Finally Alexi got her into the back, binding her to the seat with the rope of garlic stems.

I glanced in back, where Alexi was trying to load the syringe. "Do you really think that that stuff will help?"

"I'm hoping her main problem is simple hunger, perhaps more severe from the transition process. I never knew anyone who went through the transition in this particular way, so I can't say what's normal."

I made a cautious right and headed back to the interstate. Alexi made his injection, and after a couple of minutes of restlessness she seemed to calm down. I wasn't willing to risk stirring her up by asking Alexi anything further. Beside me Ray flipped the sun visor down to check the look of the scratches. For a second or two he stared not at himself, but at the reflection of the back seat--what would have seemed to be an empty back seat. "Something wrong?" I asked quietly.

He gave me his half-smile. "What could be wrong?" He flexed his face a bit, wiped at some of the dried drips of blood, and finally rested his head back against the headrest. Sometime during the past few hours the snow had settled into being a solid storm. By some odd good fortune I found an orange DOT truck and stayed in its freshly plowed and sanded lane; I wasn't about to put all my faith in the four wheel drive, no matter what wild safety claims the manufacturers made. I lost the truck after thirty miles and did the rest of the trip in cold, slow silence, getting us home after four in the morning. At least there wasn't a race against the sun to worry about, I thought as I started pulling the car around by the barn, but then reconsidered and put it close to the door of the house.

As I pulled up to the back door, crunching through the snow, Alexi undid the rope of stems. Almost before I'd stopped the car by the door, he was out, carrying her along with him, leaving me to take care of Ray.

"He seemed in a rush." Ray shook the snow from his boots, brushed off my coat, but left it on.

"After all he went through to get her, I don't think that he wants to take the chance of having her get away again."

"Would the house hold her if she really wanted to leave?"

"Wash those scratches out carefully," I said, evading his question. "There's no way of knowing what kind of filth she was digging through in that building. Or what kind of thing she last had her claws in."

We stood at the foot of the staircase, where we'd been only about a day before. A darkly striped feline form wound around us and disappeared to the shadows of the next flight of stairs. Ray locked eyes with me. "You didn't answer my question."

"And if I'm keeping track properly there's about ninety-nine more I get to pass on before the score is even on not answering questions." I sighed and looked up the stairs where small green eyes glowed back at me. "I'm sorry but suddenly it's all a mess again. I'm not even sure if I care anymore; whether she's here, whether he can keep her from running... It's just not part of my life anymore."

Ray caught up to me in the corridor, outside of my room. "You care, damn it! You care or you would never have gone tonight--you would have walked out as soon as he told you she was still around. That is if you hadn't left a week ago when his being upset was first echoing back on you. If you didn't care you wouldn't be so torn up over all this. Your only problem is you can't stop caring. It's not an easy habit to break."

I tried not to think of his words as I took dry clothes into the bathroom and started another thawing shower, knowing that if I didn't stop the chill now it would become an uncontrollable shiver.

Sleep, I thought as I turned on the soft electric wall lamps, sleep was what I really needed. It had been almost twenty-four hours since Ray had returned with the urn. My curiosity could wait, telling Alexi that I had to leave could wait, I tried to reason with myself. The steam and hot water took over and slowly my mind gave in to my exhaustion.

* * *

The room was just as dark as it had been when I'd fallen asleep, and for a minute I was convinced that it must only be a few minutes later. I flipped the switch on the little stained glass lamp next to my bed. The brass clock said 4:12 P.M. Alexi would be awake. Ray would probably be ready to leave, whether the long, gravel driveway was plowed or not. I dressed quickly and wasted no time getting downstairs, mentally bracing myself for what I had to tell Alexsander, hoping that I could find him alone and hold myself to really going through with all I had to say.

I sensed that Alexi was in the room; as I approached, I listened carefully--if he was in the middle of a conversation with Ray I'd wait, get myself some tea or something first, and come back when he was alone. What I had to say had waited this long; it could always wait a little longer.

But the room seemed silent, and I entered. I was absolutely not prepared for what I saw: Ray sat at my work table with a steaming cup in front of him that looked untouched. As I opened the door it distracted his attention from what stood at the far end of the room.

It must have been almost six feet square, built mostly of thick metal pipes that were set into flat metal for a "ceiling" and "floor." On the flat areas were words, an entire line of words all around the cage in a strange language, as well as several symbols of a religious nature. Confined by the metal cage was Alexi's former lover. As both Ray and I watched, she moved around the cage in silence, dematerializing and moving toward the bars, only to be repelled as she reached the level of the pipes. Her progress was slow, but she was trying every bar, at every level, looking for the one spot that may have been unprotected. "Is Alexi here?" I finally was able to ask.

"No," Ray replied, taking a sip from his cup, yet still keeping his eyes on the cage. "You just missed him; he said he had to pick up something in town before they closed."

"And you volunteered to 'baby-sit'? I really didn't expect to find you still around." I grabbed a chair across from him.

He returned my nervous smile. In his hand was the cross that Alexi had thrown into the backpack the night before, on the table between us were five tubes of blood, labeled with her name. "I couldn't miss this. I'll never see anything quite like this again. I hope." He looked at the cross for a minute. "I don't like the thought of any--human--being confined like that. Before Alexsander left she was just sitting on the floor. Just watching us. People shouldn't be treated like that."

"But she's..."

"Not human? I may have to change my mind on that."

"You know, in the four days you've been here I don't think you've said this much to me--not without asking some question."

"How about explaining this to me?" He reached into the pocket of his shirt and dropped my necklace and ring onto the table.

"It's mine," I said simply, taking the piece of jewelry and not looking away from him.

"That's why you're having so much trouble with the thought of leaving Alexi?"

I looped the chain over my head. "Ray, I don't want to discuss this here. I need to talk to Alexi--he's not here. I've been asleep for almost twelve hours and if I don't get something to eat and a cup of tea this headache is going to kill me!" The headache I really could handle, but no matter what her apparent state was I didn't want to discuss this matter in front of Alexi's old lover.

As I'd hoped, Ray followed me to the kitchen, mercifully holding his questions until I'd had a chance to join him at the table with my own cup. "I don't think that that ring you have is any casual piece of jewelry."

"I know where you're heading with this, Ray. Yes, it is what it looks like. Alexsander gave it to me a little over a year ago." I paused for a second, picking up the ring from where it hung and turning it to watch the colors flash within. "It was one of the reasons why Alexi was working so much to overcome some of his fears. I don't think my family would recognize anything less than a religious ceremony." I surprised myself by keeping a steady voice through my explanation.

"Seems like a lot of trouble to go through to please a few relatives."

"No. What's a lot of trouble is what he's going through now. This mess is because the wishes of her family overrode those of Alexi fifty years ago. Legally he had no say in what happened. He definitely didn't want to face that again. This was our best chance to be sure that I would end up as we both wanted." I wiped away a stray tear and took another sip of tea. "Hasn't quite turned out as we planned."

"You're still stalling on talking to him about this. Sooner or later he has to know what you're planning."

"I want to tell him! When I woke up, all I knew was that Alexi was in the lab room. When I got down there all I found was you."

"Maybe that's for the better. I'd like you to take this. Last night you said you didn't know where you'd go..."

"I don't want that! Not if that's what you offered me on Thursday!" I took a look at the address he'd given me, resenting the thought that I might need "protection" from Alexi. Even so, I managed a slight laugh. "I don't need a place to be 'safe'!"

"It's not the same place I mentioned last week. Consider Alexi's safety. What kind of questions would it raise from your family if they find out you've left him? You've already told me that there's no way you could try to explain even a part of this to them."

I folded the note and tucked it into the pocket of my jeans, thanked him for his concern for both of us, then finished my cooling tea. "I have a few things to check on outside."

* * *

It had cleared during the day and now was simply cold out. Despite the cold I knew it was still my week to take care of the animals. Besides, being out in the cold air, out doing the dull work I needed to do, gave me time to think. I wasn't sure of how to take Ray's offer; certainly if I was sent somewhere on his recommendation I could be sure that no one there would ever ask about my circumstances. Yet I also resented the idea that I needed taking care of. And yet again, I could see his point about following his advice as a way to protect Alexi.

Inside the barn I found that I was too late; everything had already been taken care of. Probably, I thought, by Ray in a restless mood. And I could probably credit him with getting the long gravel driveway as cleared of snow as was possible.

I walked back out into the sharp air, letting my eyes adjust to the hilly snowscape that stretched around the house, lit tonight by a slightly-better-than-half-full moon that was getting high in the sky. *Not a bad memory to keep,* I thought as I started back. Even better was the few feet of mist spread over the large pond, where the until-now-mild autumn had left the water quite a bit warmer than the air had turned. An unusual shadow by the water caught my eye, and after taking a couple of steps toward it, I realized that only Alexi could casually sit by a pond in ten degree weather. I also realized that this was probably my best chance to talk to him.

"It's unusually beautiful tonight," he said as I neared the spot where he sat. There was no way to take him by surprise; if he didn't sense me at this range then certainly he could have heard me squeak my way through the fresh snow. He took off the jacket he wore and spread it over the snowy bank of the pond, an invitation for

me to sit.

"It's very cold out here tonight," I corrected, trying to fold his coat around my legs as I sat.

As always, the cold air made me want to cough. While I fought that, a sand truck rumbled along somewhere up the road, seeming twice as loud in our silence.

"I have something I must discuss with you, 'Lexi," I was finally able to say.

He looked at me, his face shadowed beautifully in the blue-white moonlight, "I have something I must tell you myself," he said quietly and then looked around behind us quickly. "And I'm just as glad that you found me out here; I'd rather say this to you without anyone else around. It's about her." He looked out across the misted pond. "I've been awake since about one; I've been down in the lab room with her..."

"Alexsander, please! I think I know what you're trying to say," I guessed incorrectly. "Please just let me say what I have to."

I wrapped myself deeper into my coat and tried to fight the cold. "I remember almost six years ago, when you first told me how after her death, after losing her, you went into seclusion for years. Until the memory of her and of what you'd done since first knowing her led you to wanting a relationship like that again."

"And it took years from then; and what we have is better than what I had then, you must believe me."

"No." He was making this harder for me than it already was. "You don't see it. You still love her." I pulled my hand free from his. "No, 'Lexi, let me finish. I've known all these years that you still loved her, and it never bothered me, you never let it interfere with us. But now, it's so different--I never minded you having your memories--but now she's actually here! It's not fair to you--or to her--or to me. I think it would be best if I went away. At least for a while."

I was shaking, not just from the cold. I wiped the hot tears from my numb cheeks. "Alexi, I'm so sorry, I'm..." I rose, unable to finish what I was saying, unable to remember just what it was I was going to say, and quite sure I had to get away before my pain got worse.

"Sabri, please! Please just listen to me now! After, if you still feel you must go, then so be it." I forced myself to stop, waiting for Alexi to catch up to me. He touched my numb cheek and then held my hand for a moment before ushering me to the barn and out of the severe cold. "As I said last week, please don't leave me." He stood with his back to the dusty windows, a tall shadow in the silver light. I moved closer to the window, closer to the light to see him better. "If things go as I feel they must, I will need you by me more than ever in the next few days. And by then there may be no reason left for you to even leave."

"She's dying?" I asked, watching as my breath steamed the cold glass.

"No, not as such..." He looked down the long room to where the horses were making restless sounds. They were used to getting attention when someone entered the building; our ignoring them was no doubt upsetting them. "...But I can't seem to stabilize her. I thought that perhaps it was her change--all the physical stress of it, the mental stress of it. I thought that all she would need was heavy feeding, some rest, the same as any of us, when we're new to this life. Then she would begin to recover to her old self."

He walked from the window to an old crate and sat on it, staring at some stray hay that littered the floor. "But I gave her all the extract we had, as well as all I could spare from them." He gestured to the animals. "And after that she seemed calm, until Ray entered the room; then she was back to being wild. She's still picking up a blood scent from him. If I can pick it up then she certainly can. But she has no control. She's more of an animal than they are." He gestured contemptuously toward the horses.

"She should improve, though?" I knelt on the cold floor by his side, digging my icy hands deep into my pockets.

"I don't know--I've never seen anyone go through this. I have seen ones who said they had been through it, but they seemed little different from me. Yet they always claimed that they needed no extra recovery time. But that part of the

recovery is not what worries me--when I probe her mind, it's as if...as if it's bottomless, formless..." He paused, pulling on the coat he'd carried in from the outside. "She doesn't even recognize me, not as *me*. She seems to know that I am one of her kind, but I can find there no thought of just who I am. Her mind is so formless that it's more difficult to read than that of an animal."

"There's no hope?" I asked him, lifting my gaze from the floor.

"No--I'm sure of it. From all I've learned over the years, I'm certain of one thing--that any recovery should at least have begun by now, if not have been completed. And over the span of this night she's actually seemed to lose ground--become even less human."

"But what could be wrong? What could have happened to do this?" I asked, my curiosity burning even as my heart broke, and as I knew Alexi's had been broken twice.

"I don't know." He shook his head in a disgusted way and looked away from me. "I can't know. She's been given every chance to recover from her transition, from being that weak--a far better chance than some of the recoveries that I've been through. Perhaps it was the traumatic way she was brought back, perhaps there was some sort of psychic trauma at that time, perhaps it was going through that alone, in fear." He sighed harshly, then drew new breath to speak again. "And perhaps the damage was done fifty years ago, when she was cremated. It could be that she needs the soil she was buried in..."

"But she was never buried..."

"Then perhaps that is the problem. She may need the soil she rose from. I don't know; they were all the same for me. All I know is that I have a responsibility, a responsibility as the one who changed her to be certain that she creates no danger to herself, to normal humans, or to her kind." He paused again, his eyes again fixed on the floor, and after a moment spoke again, his words little above a whisper. "Sabri, I must destroy her--before she can hurt Ray, or you, or even herself. Before she can destroy all the memories I have of our time together so long ago. Sabri, please..." His eyes found mine in the cold light. "...to get through all this I need to know that at least I have you, now and always."

He held out his arms to me, and I couldn't resist. He was right--he would need my support through this and after, and I knew there was no way I could ever again think of leaving. As he held me, as I felt his lips on mine and soon sensed his other need, I gave my consent by pulling away long enough to unzip my jacket. Then his lips were again on mine, then on my neck, where he created a shallow bite that would bleed sluggishly, reducing the amount of blood I'd lose and extending our pleasure as he fed slowly. It also would look very innocent, like nothing more than an odd scratch.

An unknown length of time later he held me beside him, wrapped in his jacket as well as mine, and I let my mind slowly drift back to the problem we faced. "How do you plan to accomplish this?"

"I have this." He reached around me into the pocket of his jacket and took out a pill bottle. "I called the veterinarian earlier today and told him that we had to transport the horses and didn't want them as upset from travel as they had been the last time. He gave me these, which should dissolve rather nicely into some serum from you, or Ray, or from them." He gestured to the horses. "She's already come to see the injections as a possible source of food, of something that makes her feel better. I expect to have no problem in getting it into her."

I smiled at the simplicity of his plan, and at the possible flaw that I saw. "I never knew that you could put a vampire to sleep." From what I'd seen from tests I'd done on him, medication injected would simply be broken down and rendered harmless before it could be toxic.

"At this dose it should overwhelm her system; she'll sleep, but it won't kill her. I just can't face her eyes as I destroy her in a conventional way. Perhaps this will spare her the pain as well."

It would also spare him pain, I realized--the drug would numb most of their emotional link. "When do you want to try?"

"I'm not fully ready yet--this is as far as I've gotten with the preparations. The next step will be much more difficult. I hope to be ready by dawn. I think she will be most susceptible at that time--it's still a weak time for her."

"I can prepare the serum while you do whatever else you need to do." I stood up, a little dizzy. The blood for the serum certainly wasn't coming from me--I'd given enough the last few days. "I do think we should explain this to Ray first, however."

* * *

"You really think that you can go through with this?" Ray asked Alexi as we walked back to the lab room. Alexsander had discussed his plan as Ray and I ate, but now much work had to be done in the next several hours, or we'd have to wait for the next dawn.

"I know that I have to. It's a problem that I created; it's one I must resolve."

Ray gave his head a slight shake as he opened the door to the room. "If only more people in this world felt that way."

I gathered some equipment from the shelves. "I'm going to need some help from you, Ray. I need these crushed to powder, the finer the better." I set the bottle of pills and a mortar and pestle on the worktable. "But first I need something else from you--I need serum to mix that with."

He gave me a look. "It has to be you," I replied. "I've given enough of my own over the last few days, just ask 'Lexi. I'm not running out to get horse serum, and mixing the drug with Alexi's would only neutralize it."

He stared at me for a moment and then started to roll up his sleeve. "I knew I owed you a favor, but I never knew I owed you blood."

I picked up a couple of red-stoppered tubes and set them down by his arm. "You came up with the system, not me," I joked back, wrapping a tourniquet around his upper arm and then wiping it down with alcohol before probing with the needle.

"You've had a few IV lines over the years, haven't you?" I asked as I fought for a place for the needle.

He looked up from watching my lack of progress, seeming somewhat amused by my efforts. "Maybe a couple."

"More like a dozen. All the best veins are scarred." I finally got in a vein and started filling the tube. A slow smile spread across my face, and I tossed my head in the direction of the cage. "Not that that would matter to fangs."

While Ray and I were occupied, Alexsander sat at the far end of the table, alternately watching her escape attempts and making brief notes in a small book.

"How can that work?" Ray asked him after pulling his sleeve back down. "Metal bars shouldn't hold someone like that!"

"And chaining her hands should not have held her either," Alexi pointed out to him.

"There was a cross on that chain," Ray reminded him.

"Yes--and her fear of that held her then--just as her fear of those words will hold her now." He looked for a moment at the inscriptions that ran around the base and top of the structure. I couldn't make sense out of them, as they were in Alexi's native language, but they must have been religious and rather powerful. "Devices like this were used almost three hundred years ago in my homeland, as a way of protecting a threatened human from us. I felt it would work just as well to keep one of us in as it did to keep us out."

"And she hasn't realized that none of the devices that work on her don't harm you?"

"No. There always seems to be an almost instinctive fear of the precautions used by humans to keep us away; it's not something that must be learned. And while she seems to realize that I am like her, she doesn't seem to have enough reasoning to see that she could put aside her fears and be free."

Alexi's answer must have satisfied Ray's curiosity for now, or perhaps Ray's mind was still caught on the thought of what if would be like if she realized she

had nothing to fear. For now Ray concentrated on the six pills I'd set before him earlier, while Alexi continued with his notes and sketches.

After half an hour Alexi finished whatever plans he'd been working on in the notebook he had. He took one last look toward the cage and then turned to us as he stood up. "If you don't mind me leaving you with her, I have a weapon to create, and..." He checked his watch. "...less than six hours to fully complete it."

Ray had finished grinding the pills and I sifted a little of the drug into the serum, looking across the room to the cage, where she was still trying to escape, this time by trying to bend the bars apart.

"I need a little more of the drug in here." Ray was also staring away at the cage, and at its occupant. At my words he scraped a little more of the tranquilizer out of the little bowl and into the tube. "That's about the tenth time in the last five minutes that you've gone off staring at her like that."

"It's not something I ever expect to see again," he replied, tapping another small mound of drug into the serum.

"You hope." I finished my stirring. So far about half the dose was in there, and each new addition was still dissolving easily. So far, so good. "She never stops trying to get out of there, no matter what time of day it is, no matter who is here."

He tapped another small mound of powder into the tube. "You can't blame her for that." He took a quick look over his shoulder at her attempts to bend the bars. "Anyone in that position would try the same thing."

I watched as the latest load of powder dissolved grudgingly. From here on would be the challenge. Somehow I found it odd that he would include her, in all her wildness, with normal humans, yet was always careful to speak of Alexi as one of "them." Perhaps it was a change of heart on his part. Or, I thought as my mind wandered into a seeking state, he identified with her position. Suddenly I was certain that what bothered him was not so much the idea of a cage, but a memory of one. No! I stopped myself, knowing that it wasn't right to keep probing without a pressing reason.

"Considering how much Alexsander loved her, he certainly hasn't spent that much time with her. He's hardly been in here." He dropped the next lot in, where it slowly settled to the bottom of the tube.

I stirred and most of it dissolved. "*That* is not the woman he loved; that's some animal in her form. Imagine thinking that some one you loved was dead. Years later you find that she is alive, but so badly damaged that she no longer recognizes you, that she's hardly even human. And there's no hope for recovery. It's probably too painful for him to be around."

"This is the last of it." He dumped the remainder of the drug into the tube, where it sat in a lump.

I added about half of the serum from the spare tube, and got the last of the drug to dissolve. "That's enough for me." I set the tube back in the rack and turned to wash my hands. "I've got to get out of this place. Maybe I can get a little sleep before dawn. I'm sure glad I have this week off. Maybe I can recover by next Monday?"

"Going upstairs?" Ray asked as we headed out of the room.

"No, I think I'm going to stay down here--if I go to the pillow room the first light should waken me. That's when everything is supposed to happen anyway. You're going out aren't you?"

I was as puzzled as he was as to where that had come from. Finally he just laughed, although a little nervously. "Pretty soon there'll be nothing I can hide from either of you."

* * *

I awoke chilled, aching and disoriented from the restless hours of sleep. Above me, the sky was already streaked with the peach color of a winter sunrise, and I reminded myself that I had little time before Alexi would need me in the lab

room. I started for the room, but quickly realized that I'd be little help to him until I'd had a strong cup of tea.

Even with that delay, I managed to beat Alexi to the room. Ray sat sat the table again, and she watched him with a silent, pleading stare, her hands still caressing the inside of the bars. Ray watched her, his face expressionless, his hands occupied with pleasing the large, black and tan raccoon-impostor of a cat that sat in his lap. "Good rest?" he asked me, not taking his eyes off the cage.

"No. I think I was too worried about this, or I was picking up Alexsander's feelings again--I woke up at least every hour." I set the steaming brew on the table and poured myself into a chair. "I think I'll need this before I can even realize just how bad I feel."

As I sipped my tea, the cat tired of Ray's attentions and jumped down to the floor. "At least you had a little friendly company to wait with."

The cat made a casual lick at a spot on his long fur and then started for the door, his path taking him close to the cage. As he got close, he stopped suddenly, eyes locking on her. Almost faster than could be seen he leapt two feet backwards, hissing and fluffing up to twice his size before diving under the table and then out of doors.

In the cage, she had frozen as the animal neared her; now she still held that position at the back of the cage, fangs bared.

"Wish I'd know the other night that all I needed to drive her off was a cat."

"She probably doesn't remember just what one is." I wrapped my hands around the mug, enjoying how warm it made my hands. "Alexi certainly has no problem with them."

"They aren't what I expected," Ray observed of the cats that were around. "Never thought of a vampire as one to keep pets."

"They're really mine. I grew up in the neighborhood, remember? They just followed me over once I moved in. Alexi doesn't mind--he sees them as fellow nocturnal predators. And as an easy form of pest control for the house and barn."

I set my cup aside and rose to prepare what would be needed for the morning's activities, still feeling numb with exhaustion.

Alexi came in around five-thirty, after I'd finished the rest of my cup of tea and had moved on to warming the serum to try and get the last stubborn part of the dose back into solution. Ray was kind enough not to try to engage me in conversation at this awful hour. Until I had finished with the serum I didn't want to go back to my tea. Usually I was lax on eating or drinking in here, but that was when I was working with samples from myself or Alexsander.

"Are we ready?" Alexi asked me, setting the urn on the table along with a knife. It was carved of wood, with a carefully sharpened point and sides, the whole thing some twelve inches long.

"Just about," I said, loading the serum into a syringe.

"You're really going through with it." Ray repeated his question from the previous evening; he didn't seem to believe that Alexi could actually do this.

"As I said before, I have little choice." He took a quick look at his watch. "She should be entering her weakest phase around now."

"She's been pretty quiet for the last hour or so." Ray agreed as I handed Alexi the drug-laden syringe.

"It's warm!" He gave me a questioning look.

"It's the only way I could keep all of it in solution. You'll have to inject that before it cools or you'll lose some of the dose." For a second I grabbed his free hand, my eyes meeting his and giving him my wordless assurance, bringing a sad smile to his face.

Finally he moved to the cage, calling to her softly, then reaching through the bars to grasp her arm. With his other hand he delivered the drugged serum, as she realized that it didn't hold what she expected and clawed at his hand, trying to free her arm or shake loose the syringe.

He handed me the empty syringe, which I then passed to Ray, who stood closer to the table than I. As she became unsteady he opened the door of the cage,

lowering her to the floor. She raised her hand up to his cheek, her lips moving as if trying to speak.

He smoothed some of the stray hair back from her white face as her eyes closed and spoke to her very softly. "No, love, none of this was meant to be."

He sighed and then watched as she sank deeper under the drug's spell. He took the knife from me and then made one more request. "Please leave us--I want to do this alone."

* * *

Ray turned as he got to the back door. It was the evening of the next day. The urn once again sat on my shelf. Late the previous evening 'Lexi had handed it back to me--empty. The ashes had been scattered on the pond, something Alexi now said he'd wished he'd done years ago.

Before I could think of what he meant he reached around my shoulders and gave me a companionable hug. "Thanks," I said. "I mean it, for coming out here, for staying when things got so crazy. I wouldn't have blamed you for leaving."

"I made a promise." Ray looked over my shoulder, back to where Alexi had disappeared. Despite the spirit of the season and unwavering stubbornness on both sides, Ray had refused every gift offer except food, which Alexi was now packing. "He'll be all right?"

"Yeah. It may take a little time for him to get over it all, but I've still got a few days off. I'll be here to be sure he's OK."

"He's a lucky man to have you." I noted Ray's careful wording--finally he was willing to admit Alexi's humanity.

"I know," Alexi answered as he returned, handing the bag over to Ray and then shaking his hand. "If you ever need anything from either of us..."

"I'll know where to find you--both." As he turned, his eyes caught the reflection of the room in the door's glass. Although Alexi clearly blocked half my view of the glass, I was visible in full in the reflection. Ray just shook his head.

Alexsander and I watched as he started down the driveway, fishtailing a bit at the start where there was still more snow than gravel.

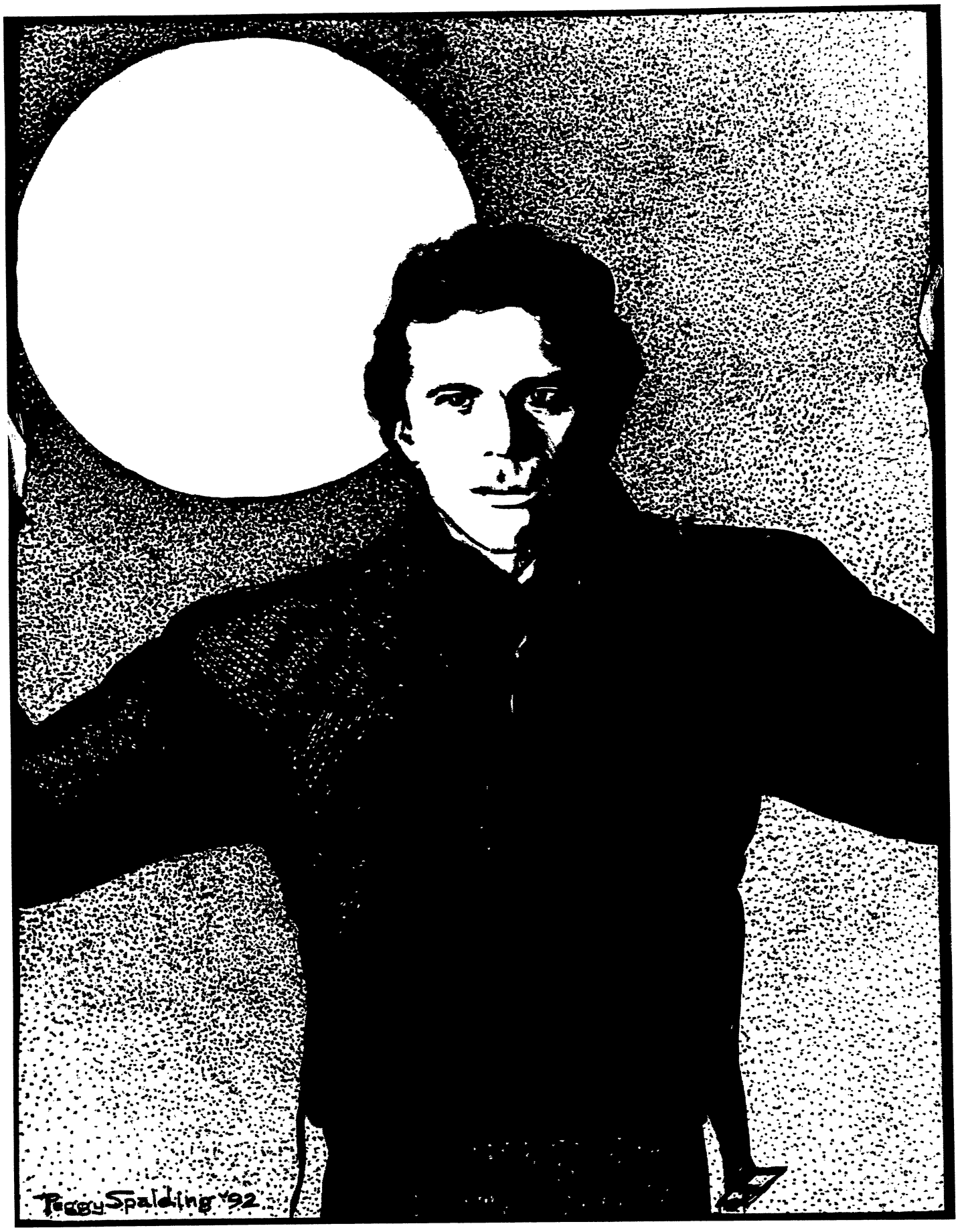
"Ray left us a gift," I said as I watched the 'vette's taillights disappear into the evening gloom. 'Lexi just gave me a look of confusion. "He was curious about this 'extract' we kept talking about. I finally told him that I'd show him what it was and explain what it does if he'd provide the source."

He looked at the vial I'd handed him. With all that had been going on the last few days the only time he'd fed were the two times with me. "I'll still need more."

"I know." I also knew that with that extract and my fresh contribution he'd be well set for more "conventional" pleasures. As I closed the door I turned to him and reached up, bringing his lips to mine. "When shall we start?"

- The End -

[Heidi Staneslow has been creating stories about Sabri and Alexsander for almost twelve years, and putting them down on paper for nearly seven. A prequel to "Promises" (entitled "Deadend") may be found in the first issue of the Stingray zine Small Favors, published by Solstice Press, 607 West Jefferson St., Waxahachie, TX 55165.]


Peggy Spalding '92

A STRANGER CALLS

Through an open window he came
An apparition calling my name.
Leaning against my dresser,
Taunt body emitting primitive energy.

Dark, stormy eyes staring into my soul.
Perfect mouth curving in a sexy smile.
Teeth gleaming in the moonlight.
Strong hand raking through unruly hair.

Staring at him, quivering with fear,
Eyes wandering his lean, muscular form.
Wantonness stirring inside. Quickly
looking away, gasping for air.

Crossing to my bed in one fluid motion.
Eyes pleading--don't be afraid.
Longing for someone to care, silently saying.
Holding out his hand, hopefully.

Without hesitating, taking it.
Our fingers lacing together.
Reeling as his strength surges through me.
Shyly raising my eyes, meeting his gaze.

Intensity of his look shocking me.
Slowly lowering, touching my mouth,
Thrilling at the taste of his lips.
Pulling him nearer.

Gazing into my eyes, questioning.
Slowly nodding my approval.
Hand trembling, untying my gown,
Placing his mouth on my neck.

Senses reeling at his touch,
Nails raking his back.
Pain of needles pricking, stinging, but
pleasure quickly replacing.

His joy matching mine, taking nourishment.
Wrenching himself away, raggedly breathing.
Caressing my neck with infinite care.
Drawing me close into his arms.

Lying together, holding me,
until dawn breaking.
Looking at me sadly,
Tenderly and deeply kissing me.

Slowly leaving my bed, walking
To the window silently.
Glancing back for a moment,
Eyes glistening as he leaves.

Lying alone, considering my actions.
Smiling at the memory, not regretting.
Early light filtering through the curtain.
Closing my eyes, slipping into darkness.

Sleeping deeply and dreamlessly.
Resting, no sound disturbing me.
Dark, peaceful silence surrounding me,
Completely at peace.

-Robin White

Barb '93

FIRST DATE

by

Margaret L. Carter

The late afternoon sun beat down through the rear window of the Corvette, though the glass was tinted as dark as Virginia law allowed. Nigel Jamison frowned at the highway through his polarized sunglasses. *Thank God for small favors, we're driving east, not west.* And they'd be driving back to Williamsburg after dark. A twinge in his upper jaw assailed him as he glanced at the young woman in the passenger seat. He'd snatched a few minutes with Denise, before starting the hour-long drive to Norfolk, to appease their mutual need, but not wanting to leave her visibly drained, he'd stopped before he was satisfied.

This is a first! For nobody else would I do this! Only last weekend, he had persuaded Denise to help him appropriate a rare volume from the special collections room of William and Mary, where she was a graduate student. In the process, he'd succumbed to "carelessness," letting her notice clues to his nonhuman nature. As a Psychology major, he knew his behavior probably hadn't been accidental. He'd unconsciously hoped she would pick up the cues, question him, and accept the truth. He hadn't realized until that night how tired he had become of lying to her, keeping his best friend at arm's length. Many of his people, a nonhuman species of nocturnal habits and specialized diet, classed ephemerals as inferior animals unworthy of friendship. Nigel had known for years that Denise was different. Her readiness to move beyond her initial shock and accept him as a lover proved her worth.

And now they were on their way to a barbecue at her parents' house. *How did I get myself into this?* Easy--his eagerness to share another night with her, after the joy of their mutual discovery the previous weekend, provided the motive. When she'd apologetically told him she had to attend a birthday party for her sister in Norfolk Friday evening, Nigel had elected to go with her rather than wait several more hours for her companionship. While he'd heard all his life about the hazard of getting "addicted" to a favorite donor, he'd never expected the condition to hit so fast and so hard. He'd offered only one stipulation, that Denise let him drive, in his own car. Anything, even glare on the freeway, would be preferable to enduring her timid driving an hour in both directions. Amused, she had agreed.

Now he questioned the wisdom of his impulsive offer. He'd committed himself to hanging around her for hours in the company of strangers, while he could hardly bear to keep his hands--et cetera--off her. "Do you realize," said Denise, interrupting his misgivings, "this is our first date?" She leaned back against the headrest, combing her fingers through her long, chocolate-brown hair. Even with the car's air conditioning, it must have felt damp on the back of her neck. Nigel clenched his jaws and quickly looked away. Didn't she know how that provocative pose affected him?

She was right, though; as undergraduates at William and Mary, they had become friends but had never actually "dated." Then he'd moved to the University of Virginia in Charlottesville for his graduate work, and they'd kept up their

relationship by letters alone until just this past week. "So it is," he said, "and I hate to imagine what your parents will think."

She wiggled in the bucket seat, stretching her legs. "Say what?"

"Doesn't bringing a young man home to meet the family have a certain significance in American culture?"

She laughed. "Well, when I phoned to ask if you could come along, Mom didn't drop any hints. It's only this once; you'll live through it."

"Granted, it couldn't be as bad as a stake through the heart," he said with humorously exaggerated gloom.

Denise gave him an uneasy glance. He sensed she couldn't figure out the polite way to react, as if she were hearing a wheelchair user make "crip" jokes. He hoped she would get over this residual discomfort. Strange, how he'd almost needed to convince her of the truth all over again at her home this afternoon. Once he'd coaxed her past her initial reluctance, she had reveled in the pleasure of his kiss, yet he suspected she would rather believe that he was "normal," that she had imagined half of what they'd shared on their last meeting.

You've got plenty of time to work it out, he reminded himself. *Concentrate on getting through the next few hours.* What had possessed him to accept a dinner invitation? At least an outdoor barbecue allowed more evasion than a sit-down meal, where everyone at the table could see exactly what he wasn't eating.

Denise said in a more serious tone, "You never told me how your uncle reacted, when you told him you'd found the book."

The book Denise had helped him steal from the college library. "Oh, Uncle Ian was delighted. Gave me a 'well done, dear boy.' I didn't think it necessary to tell him how far I got you involved. I don't believe he would approve of my--frankness."

"You did plenty of things to disapprove of," she said.

So she still hadn't completely gotten over his pressuring her into an illegal act. Well, he couldn't blame her; she had taken a considerable risk for him. And he was truly grateful, if only he could show her the sincerity of his feelings.

He sighed with less complicated gratitude when the car entered the shelter of the Hampton Roads tunnel. The respite from the sun was all too brief, though. A few minutes later, following Denise's directions, he took the Tidewater Drive exit onto the surface streets and drove to a suburban tract development. Apparently it was an older one, the houses' original mass-produced quality blurred by idiosyncratic paint jobs and built-on additions. And trees, lots of mature trees spreading their branches over housetops. He hoped Denise's parents' home had plenty of shade.

It did, he saw when she ordered him to stop in front of a split-level with blue trim. She looked him over with an appraising smile as he switched off the motor. "I'm glad my sister's married, and so are her friends from work she's inviting. I wouldn't want to let a single woman within ten feet of you."

He glanced down at his kelly-green Izod shirt and gray slacks. "You don't think the lack of a tan spoils the effect?" he teased.

Denise snorted. "The romantic pallor goes great with that luscious wavy black hair, and you know it! Not to mention the thick eyebrows--you look like a Byronic hero."

He hadn't gotten around to telling her that if he didn't shave between them regularly, the eyebrows would grow together over the bridge of his nose. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. Let's get this over with." His nervousness wasn't entirely put on, though some of it he projected to ease Denise's well-camouflaged uncertainty about turning him loose among her relatives.

She whispered at the last minute before ringing the doorbell, "Don't you dare use any of that irresistible hypnotic power around here."

"Good Lord, don't you think I have any ethics? I wouldn't do that to you or yours without your permission." He forced himself to quash his minor but genuine sense of hurt. After all, she'd had only a week to accustom herself to his alien qualities.

A man with receding brown hair and a jogger's build, marred only by a slight paunch, opened the door. Denise introduced him as her father, Kenneth Holt. Nigel recalled her mentioning that her father worked in some kind of civilian management position on the Naval base. The older man led them through a living room and dining room furnished in Early American, to the kitchen. Denise's mother, a plump woman with fading blonde hair, was arranging hamburger patties on a tray. Nigel felt the pressure of her curiosity. He returned her smile, trying to look as uninteresting as possible.

"Care for a beer?" said Mr. Holt.

Nigel accepted, suppressing a grimace. The Coors he was handed from the refrigerator possessed only two virtues, coldness and wetness. The sun had made him thirsty.

Denise tugged on his arm. "Want to go out back and meet the others?"

Given a choice, he'd rather not step outside until twilight. At that moment, though, Mrs. Holt unscrewed the cap from a jar and started sprinkling the contents on the burgers. Garlic salt. His stomach lurched.

"Good idea," he said, swallowing convulsively. "Let's go outside."

"What's wrong?" Denise whispered when they'd advanced a few paces ahead of her father.

"Stick to hot dogs," he said. "If you eat garlic-flavored hamburgers, I won't be able to touch you all night. It stays in the bloodstream for hours."

Tall oaks shaded most of the back yard. A quick scan showed Nigel two picnic tables with benches, several lawn chairs, a brick barbecue grill, and assorted adults and children. Denise introduced him to her sister Claire, the birthday honoree, and Claire's husband. Three other young couples, plus a pair of older neighbors, made up the party. Denise pointed out Claire's two offspring, a boy of about six and a toddling girl, amid the flock of juveniles. Nigel felt jumpy already. He knew little of human children and avoided them whenever possible.

At the first opportunity, he claimed a chair under the thickest tree. *Not too bad, and it'll be sunset soon.* The kids ran around in circles, tossing a baseball, in the open center area of the lawn. Nigel decided he was safely out of the traffic pattern.

Mr. Holt looked up from lighting the grill a few yards away. "You don't mind dogs, I hope?" A specimen of the breed, with floppy ears and nondescript brown fur, apparently a mix of retriever and miscellaneous other genes, loped in their direction. "Pluto usually gets along okay with people."

Denise caught Nigel's eye and shrugged. "What can I say? I named him when I was too young to be held legally responsible."

"No, I don't mind dogs," he said. He saw no point in mentioning how they felt about him.

Pluto proved no exception. A few feet from Nigel's chair, the animal stopped short, crouched in a posture halfway between fear and fury, and curled his lips in a snarl. Denise clutched Nigel's arm as the growl rose in volume.

"Pluto, knock it off!" ordered Mr. Holt.

Nigel returned a bared-teeth grimace that human observers would mistake for a smile. *"Tais-toi, chien,"* he whispered, his eyes boring into the dog's.

Pluto's growl faded to a whimper. He sank to the ground and rolled over, exposing his belly.

"My God, will you look at that!" said Mr. Holt.

Denise murmured, "Did I just hear you tell the dog to shut up?"

"It worked, didn't it?" Nigel whispered back.

"Show-off."

She's right, I'd better watch my step. To his relief, Pluto slinked off to lie under the bushes beside the chain-link fence. Mrs. Holt took the empty beer can from Nigel's hand, replaced it with a full one, and pulled up a chair next to him. Denise ensconced herself on his other side. He felt her nervousness. *What's the matter, does she think I'll say something stupid?*

"So," Denise's mother said with a wide smile, "Denise told us you're a William

and Mary graduate, too."

Well, he didn't have any trouble answering that gambit. He could ramble on about his educational career for as long as the woman would listen. A few minutes later, when she asked, "And does your family live in Virginia, too?" he had to pause and gather his thoughts.

"I have a half-sister in California," he said. "We don't see much of each other, and our parents are divorced." It amused him to stick as close as possible to the truth in his cover story; besides, that policy made it easier to keep his fabrications straight. Denise shot him a skeptical look, since he'd never mentioned his sister to her. In fact, no divorce existed among his people, since they didn't marry. The paternal role consisted solely of fertilization.

Mrs. Holt murmured something indistinct that might have indicated sympathy and shifted to less personal topics. When she got up to help her husband carry trays from the kitchen, Denise said, "Maybe you should stand up and keep moving. Seated, you're an easy target."

Nigel agreed, especially since the breeze was now blowing charcoal smoke in his face. Even when he got up and circled around the yard, he felt suffocated. *All these people! How do they stand it themselves?* Since his kind had no family life analogous to the human pattern, he couldn't imagine choosing to share his space with all these minds and bodies, or even a fraction of the number. He let Denise show him the rosebushes along the back fence, while he held onto her hand to steady himself. As they walked toward the house again, one of the running children hurtled into Nigel's legs.

He stiffened, a growl rumbling in his chest. Denise tugged sharply at his hand. "Nigel!"

Adjusting his facial expression to neutral, he stared down at the child, a girl in red shorts and a Strawberry Shortcake tee-shirt. She stared up at him, mouth agape.

"I'm sorry, you startled me," he said, trying to project a calm he didn't possess. With his predator's instincts, any uninvited touch felt like an attack, but at least he could usually brace himself to handle it.

The girl mumbled, "Scuse me," and scurried off.

"What's wrong with you?" Denise hissed in his ear.

"I'm just on edge. Too many people."

"But you mingle with more than this in most of your classes."

He let out a long breath, reminding himself that she hadn't yet had time to learn much about his peculiarities. "That's different. It's--focused." In a classroom or other organized setting, the participants' attention was directed to a single target, at least as far as the average human being *could* pay attention to anything for more than ten seconds straight. He didn't have to endure this cacophony of fragmented emotions.

He asked Denise to bring him a glass of ice water. By the time she'd fetched it, twilight was thickening under the trees, and the food was sizzling on the grill. He carefully stayed upwind to avoid getting choked by the garlic fumes and the rotten-blood smell of not-quite-fresh ground beef. Meanwhile, the group quieted down while they gathered around a picnic table to watch Claire open presents. A human ritual with which Nigel had little experience, aside from attending the occasional retirement party at the University. *That's the spirit*, he told himself. *Think of this as field work.*

He braced himself for the next hurdle, the supper itself. He seldom got roped into dinner invitations, and at college cocktail buffets, he had no trouble keeping people from noticing that he didn't eat. As the family lined up with paper plates, a baseball sailed over the grill to land on the patio roof.

Mr. Holt shouted, "Hey, you kids have to be more careful with that thing!"

The ball rolled to a stop out of sight on the roof. A grubby boy--Denise's nephew--said, "Granddad, will you get the broom and knock it off, please, please?"

"Not now, we're eating. Probably need a ladder anyway."

"I'll get it," Nigel said. Anything to postpone the moment when he'd have to

take his turn at the serving table and inhale that queasy mixture of aromas. He ran toward the corner post of the patio, leaped up, and got a finger-hold on the edge of the roof. With his legs wrapped around the post, he scooted onto the overhead in seconds. He could have sprung from the ground to the housetop without touching anything but knew he'd better put on a convincing show of effort. He quickly retrieved and tossed down the baseball, along with a Frisbee and a couple of toy suction-tipped arrows. When he shinned down the corner post, the children gazed at him in wonder before taking their places at the end of the serving line.

Idiot, you're showing off again! Exactly--showing off for Denise like a teenage jock trying to impress a girl. Human behavior, and adolescent, too. At his age, over thirty, he should have grown out of youthful recklessness. The rule had been drummed into him all his life, to avoid attention-getting actions around ephemerals.

Mr. Holt was studying Nigel as if doubting his own eyes. "Man, I'd love to be in that kind of shape. What do you do for exercise?"

Nigel almost said, "Hunting." Fortunately, he realized in time that this reply would entangle him in discussions of seasonal game and the relative merits of various firearms. He could hardly explain that he disregarded legal bag limits and hunted with bare hands and teeth. Instead, he answered, "Long walks," another more-or-less truth.

By now the sun had set. He tucked his glasses in his shirt pocket and resignedly picked up a paper plate. Denise joined him at the buffet table. "It's shaping up to be a long evening," she murmured.

"I promise to be good from now on," he said in a similar low voice. Holding his breath, he adorned his plate with small scoops of assorted salads and topped off the display with a hot dog on a bun. He then retreated to the shadows under the trees at the fringe of the group, where he could pretend to eat without being observed.

Denise, slapping at mosquitoes, joined him. "Darn, I wish I could use bug repellent, but you wouldn't like that, would you?"

"Right. Repulsive chemical junk."

She glared at him. "Easy for you to say. They never get near you."

"Professional courtesy," he said, deadpan. Noticing Pluto curled up next to the fence, Nigel whistled at him. Under the compulsion of Nigel's gaze, the dog dragged himself with agonized slowness to the couple's feet. "Easy, boy, I won't bite," said Nigel. *Though the idea is tempting.* Away from the nauseous odor of the buffet table, he felt his appetite stirring at Denise's warmth and clean fragrance. He tossed his hot dog on the ground. Pluto snatched it and dashed back to his shelter under the bushes.

"That takes care of one problem," said Denise. "What about the rest of your dinner?"

He offered her the plate. She took a carrot stick but waved away the rest. Covering the food with his partially crumpled napkin, he sidled over to the garbage can and discarded the whole thing. Denise whispered in suppressed alarm, "Nigel, I just noticed--your eyes."

"What? Oh, damn." He forgotten the telltale crimson glow his silver-gray eyes emitted in darkness. He circled into the full illumination of the patio light, positioning himself where he could be pretty sure his eyes wouldn't gleam. He felt confident nobody else had noticed, since they wouldn't be expecting the phenomenon as Denise did. If they did see anything anomalous, they would assumed they'd imagined it. Fortunately, human beings had an almost limitless capacity for rationalization.

He suppressed a sigh when he realized that the evening wasn't over yet. The Holts, after clearing the debris of supper, brought out bowls of ice cream and a Trivial Pursuit board. One of the men unearthed a couple of jars for the kids to use in catching lightning bugs. *Good God, I'm getting my Norman Rockwell dose for the next ten years.* He felt a twinge of guilt as he watched Denise's eyes glint with delight when she picked her team for the game. She belonged in this

environment, with her own kind. Her sister probably had a list of prospective husbands lined up. The deeper Denise became involved with him, Nigel realized, the less chance she would have for the life she'd been socialized to expect.

When she beckoned him to her side, he muttered, "This isn't fair to the opposition, you know. I have eidetic memory."

Denise giggled. "Great, serves Claire right, as many times as she's tromped me."

He sat next to Denise on the bench, her warm body, moist from the heat, pressed against him. In the shelter of her aura, he could just about handle the claustrophobic closeness of her relatives, yelling answers and objections across the table. When the ice cream came his way, he accepted a bowl. That, at least, he could make a show of consuming. He took small nibbles and allowed each mouthful to melt completely before swallowing. When he couldn't stomach any more of the cloying sweetness, he gave the rest to Denise.

Mindful of his promise, he kept a low profile in the game. He volunteered answers only when their team was on the verge of losing a turn through disastrous stupidity. His competitive nature wouldn't let him accept defeat, even in something this silly. Besides, he enjoyed witnessing Denise's pleasure in victory. When their marker advanced to the center space, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. The taste of chocolate on her lips mingled with her own delicious flavor. He felt dizzy, with her heartbeat thundering in his ears. "Watch that," he murmured. "Not in public."

"Stuffy," she said, letting go. She'd missed his point; she didn't fathom the precariousness of his control.

At that instant, a child's screech rose from the far end of the yard. The adults stood up in unison, watching a boy rush toward them. "Kevin's stuck in the tree!" He pointed to the darkness from which Kevin's screams still emanated.

Nigel hurried with the others to the tree in question. Mr. Holt called, "Calm down, son, we'll get you."

The treed boy, who, Nigel remembered, was the older of Claire's children, subsided to a whimper. Scanning the branches, Nigel easily pinpointed the child, one leg wedged in the fork of a high limb. The flashlight Mr. Holt trained on the area hindered rather than helped Nigel's inhuman night vision.

"Good Lord, what are you doing up there?" said Denise's father in an exasperated tone. "How many times have we told you--hold still, I'll get the ladder."

"Don't bother, I'll get him down," Nigel said. He'd made enough of a spectacle of himself; once more couldn't hurt. He sprang up to the lower branches and hoisted himself into the tree. Twigs scratched his arms and face as he climbed. It would be easier and more fun to peel off his shirt, sprout wings, and fly to Kevin's side. Nigel smiled at the image of how Denise's family would react to that. *I'm sure some bat-winged monsters are perfectly nice people, but I wouldn't want my daughter to date one.*

Mr. Holt's flashlight beam wavered. He said, "How in the world did you do that?"

Nigel called down, "High school sports. The body never forgets." He pulled himself lightly, hand over hand, up to the boy's level. At the sight of Nigel, Kevin squealed in alarm. *Oh, damn, forgot about the eyes again.* Shifting his gaze, Nigel reached across to rub the boy's shoulder. "Easy, Kevin, you're all right. Relax, be quiet, let me work your leg loose." He continued a murmur of low-content, hypnotic instructions while he eased the ankle out of the V of the branch. He then leaned over to put his hands on Kevin's waist.

The child snapped out of his mesmeric daze and hugged the tree trunk. His fear made Nigel's nerves bristle. He had to soothe Kevin all over again before he could draw the boy's limp body into his arms and climb down, more slowly than he'd ascended.

He nudged Kevin into normal alertness the moment they reached the ground. Briefly stroking the bruised ankle to dissolve the pain, Nigel said, "It's not

broken." Claire grabbed the boy and administered a hug followed by a brisk scolding. Nigel struggled to shield his mind against the clamor of emotions surging around him. The family's gratitude made him feel even more smothered than their simple presence did. Amid the buzz, he heard Mr. Holt say, "Great job--that deserves a beer."

Nigel's stomach churned at the very thought. "No--no, thank you. I'm fine. I'd better get Denise home. Long drive."

Denise's hand slipped into his. He gripped it like a life preserver. Her aura enveloped him like a bubble of silence, distancing the emotional uproar.

Picking up his cue, she seconded the idea of leaving. They worked through a protracted goodbye ritual and finally got settled in the car and headed down the road. Nigel's jaws ached from gritting his teeth.

Denise watched him with an expression of mild annoyance. "I didn't think my family was that bad."

He unclamped one hand from the steering wheel to pat her arm. "Nothing personal. They're healthy, well-balanced, intelligent people--they'd have to be, to produce you. Being in *any* group for that length of time taxes my resources."

Denise mulled over that statement for a couple of minutes, while Nigel scanned the streets for something he remembered seeing on the way in. There, the neighborhood playground. He parked the Corvette under a tree and shut off the motor. "What are we doing?" said Denise.

He took his first deep breath in half an hour. "Resting."

"Your people don't exactly have families, do you?"

"We don't have family life in the same sense you do, no. Children leave their mothers right after weaning, at age three or four, to go into the care of an advisor, a mentor. In my case, my uncle." He stretched out his right arm to rub the back of Denise's neck. As the tension from the party faded, his appetite asserted itself.

"Do you really have a half-sister? You never mentioned her to me."

"Sure I do. The topic just never came up. We weren't reared together, yet we're a lot closer in age than most siblings. The normal spacing of births for most of our women is measured in centuries."

Denise shook her head. "I have a lot of trouble imagining that."

Nigel unlocked his door. "Let's walk." He went around to her side to let her out, and they strolled hand in hand around the periphery of the playground. "We're different from you in more ways than lifespan and diet. Reproductive sex has no significance for us, because we breed so seldom. We don't marry--why should a female bind herself to a male just for eleven months of pregnancy and four years of motherhood?" He paused to gather Denise into his arms and tilt her chin to make her gaze up at him. "I'll never give you children to show off to their grandparents, like your sister's pair. Male vampires are impotent and infertile with human females."

She blushed, intensifying the rosy shimmer of her aura. "You mentioned that last weekend, and I didn't really miss it. And I'm years away from worrying about children."

"That's not all you'll have to do without." He caressed the nape of her neck. With every minute, he had more trouble concentrating on the rational discussion his ethical qualms demanded. "I can't stand affairs like tonight very often. Crowds bother me. That cuts out movie theaters and most public entertainment, except on very slack nights. You won't get escorted to dinner much, because I can't even pretend to eat in most restaurants--the garlic problem. Most of our 'dates' will consist of walking in the woods or lying around the house--experimenting with interspecies relations."

She blushed even deeper. He wrapped an arm around her waist and guided her to a bench beside the swing set. She laid her head on his shoulder, idly scuffing the sand with the toe of her left tennis shoe. "Other people adjust to worse differences. Quit trying to discourage me." She grinned and socked him lightly in the chest. "What's your ulterior motive for luring me out here?"

"Oh, you noticed?" He smoothed back her hair and kissed her forehead. "I think I'm entitled to a reward, and I don't want to wait another hour for it."

"I get it--you want to 'experiment.'"

He cut short the pert remark with a lingering kiss on the lips. His hands wandered over her breasts, with the nipples taut under the thin blouse, and explored her firm abdomen and thighs. She glowed and melted under his touch, a low moan vibrating in her throat. After a while she freed her mouth and nibbled his ear. "This bench isn't the most comfortable spot." Her voice quivered with desire, while his fingers never paused in their probing of her intimate secrets.

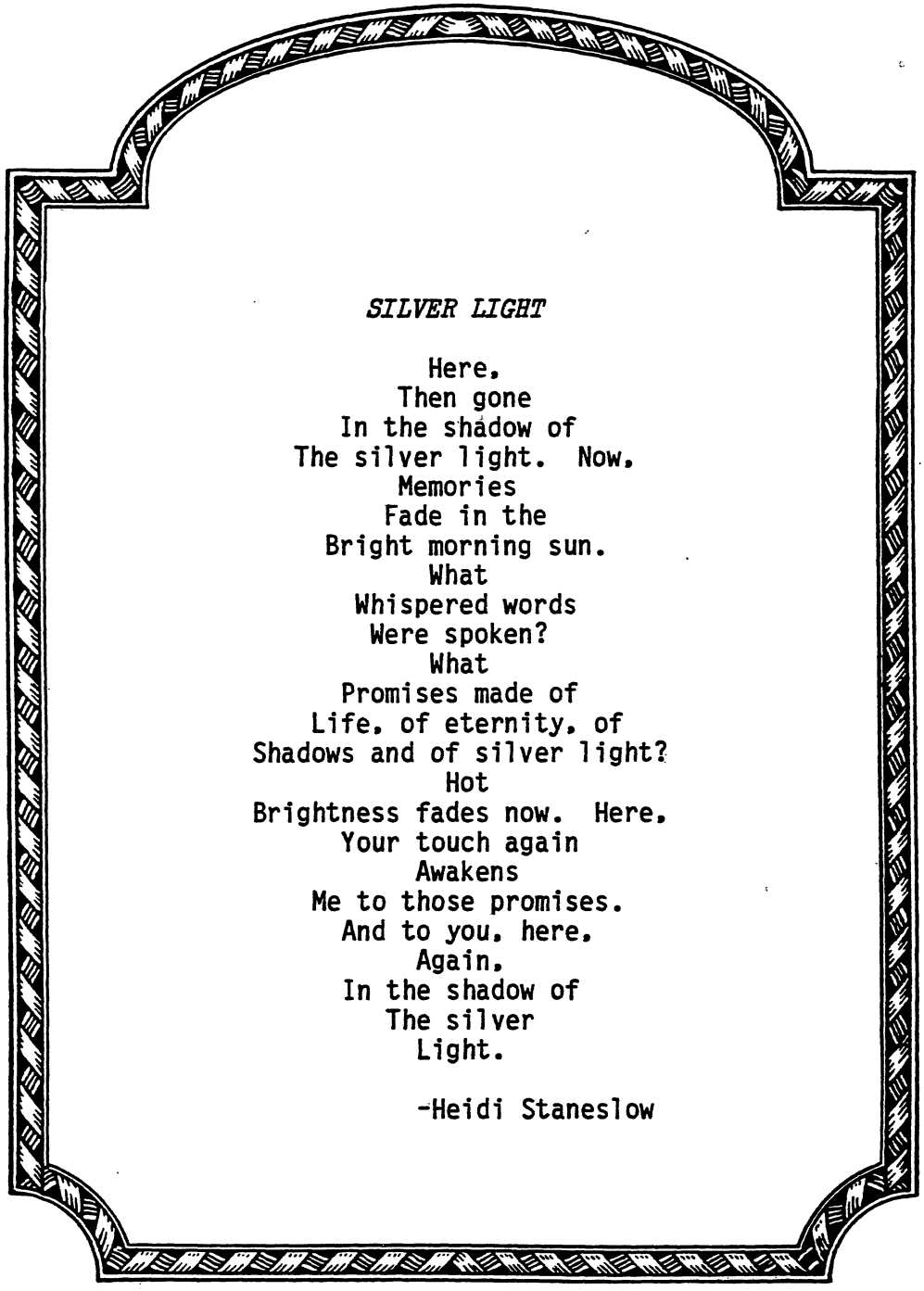
"I'll make it up to you back at your place. All night long," he whispered hoarsely. Thirst burned in the pit of his stomach.

"I'll hold you to that." She had to gasp for breath before she could speak again. "I want to make you happy--I don't mind adjusting. I want *you*. You're all I need."

He decided this was no time to consider whether the lady protested too much. At this moment she wholeheartedly meant it, and that was enough.

- The End -

[Margaret L. Carter is editor of Curse of the Undead (Fawcett, 1970), an anthology of vampire stories, and Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics (UMI Research Press, 1988), the only existing collection of scholarship on Stoker's Dracula. She is author of Shadow of a Shade: A Survey of Vampirism in Literature (Gordon Press, 1975) and The Vampire in Literature: A Critical Bibliography (UMI Research Press, 1989). Her vampire stories include Payer of Tribute (1989) a chapbook by Baker Street Publications, and "A Call in the Blood," in Voices from the Vaults (Key Porter Books, 1987), edited by D.P. Varma. A vampire story, "The Pale Hill's Side," is scheduled for Midnight Zoo in 1993. An essay, "The Truth About Vampires: Nocturnal Predators Need Love, Too," will appear in The Compleat Vampire's Companion (Prentice-Hall), edited by Rosemary Guiley. Sealed in Blood, starring Nigel, is currently being circulated to publishers by Carter's agent. (A prequel to the current tale, "Incunabula," in which Denise first discovered Nigel's true nature, appeared in the first issue of Good Guys Wear Fangs.) In March 1993, at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, she participated in a panel entitled "Vampires Are Our Friends."]



SILVER LIGHT

Here,
Then gone
In the shadow of
The silver light. Now,
Memories
Fade in the
Bright morning sun.
What
Whispered words
Were spoken?
What
Promises made of
Life, of eternity, of
Shadows and of silver light?
Hot
Brightness fades now. Here,
Your touch again
Awakens
Me to those promises.
And to you, here,
Again,
In the shadow of
The silver
Light.

-Heidi Staneslow

CATCHING CAT: THE NOVEL
PART I

by

Athan Y. Chilton

Prologue

Paul Leluvo, that's me. I make my living by playing drums, like I've been doing since I was seventeen. People say that I play remarkably well, whether it's orchestral stuff or studio work or my favorite jazz and rock. I guess you could put it that way, though I think that I just speak most clearly through music.

But if words are the only way I can touch you with Cat's story--and mine, you can still write your own soundtrack to the movie.

Here's a beginning, a moment good as any other mote in the river, a memory she gave me and then took away. And here's the first music: the Rickenbacker twelve-string...

...I'm not in San Francisco, I'm back in St. Louis two years ago, October 1966. Grey autumn night wind engulfs me in the damp smell of the city, breathes back to me my own sweat from the gig we just finished over at the fantastic, decaying Fox Theatre, and coldly fingers the wet hair that hangs down inside my collar. Chilled, I'm glad enough to follow oddly elegant Rene du Baisser down stairs slick with shadow into the smoky air of a cellar folk-music club.

I slide into a vacant spot at a round wooden table scarred with countless carved initials. Trace the blackened letters with one finger, muse on the brief immortality afforded those who make such marks. Du Baisser seats himself with unhurried grace next to me.

I've been on the road for two weeks with Rene and his band, the Shadows, sitting in for Gilbert Jons, their regular drummer, who has fallen ill and has gone into the hospital. Gil's a master, so this is no basic gig. The Shadows play some of the tightest jazz I've ever heard, and du Baisser's reputation is no greater than his skill.

Rene's great to play with, but he's more reserved than anybody I've ever met. He never travels on the bus with the rest of the band, just appears, as if by magic, whenever it's time to play, and then he dominates the music, effortlessly. The man plays saxophone with a fierce cold passion, and despite his chill facade--or maybe because of it--audiences--and women--fall at his feet. I'm well aware he appreciates my ability--I wouldn't be playing with him otherwise--but he's yet to approach me in anything like friendliness, or for that matter, anything beyond coolly perfect courtesy, until now.

So I'm astonished that he's invited me--actually, pressed me, to accompany him to this unremarkable folk music hangout in the Gaslight district of St. Louis.

"There's a girl singing," he'd said noncommittally to me as we came off-stage

earlier tonight. "I've heard her. You need to hear her."

Rene du Baisser reminds me of Old Leluvo, my great-grandfather; he doesn't lend himself to questioning.

Besides, I'm curious.

Smoke fills the low-ceilinged room, obscuring the paintings on the flat black walls. I order a glass of the house red wine.

Before the wine arrives, it happens.

"Callina," somebody says.

She materializes onstage as silently as a little wildcat, an unapproachable changeling. She looks no more than fourteen. Her hair is dark-red, almost a smoldering sort of russet-black, and so curly and thick it nearly obscures her pale, kittenish face as she tunes the Framus twelve-string that's just about as big as she is. Faded jeans and a grey knitted sweater sizes too large can't disguise her female shape, and I feel the stirrings of interest that have nothing to do with music. Well, that's not true, physical passion and music have a whole lot to do with each other...

Good lord, man, she's still a kid.

The hell she is.

...Callina, they call her Calli... *strikes a chord I can't even identify, even while it raises the hair on my neck and starts tears rising. All my thoughts disintegrate when she lifts her head and stares straight at me.*

Me? Or Rene du Baisser?

She doesn't even know I'm here.

Want to bet, Leluvo?

Something *in my head starts squirming around like a cat stuck in a box. I can't control it--I never could--*

There's a sudden wind in my face. It smells of myrrh. Reminds me of Old Leluvo, with his damned herbs...

Myrrh, for a significant death...

Her eyes positively glow--even though there are no stage lights to speak of. ***The fire's inside,*** *some voice seems to say. When she opens her mouth her voice grabs me and turns my suddenly wide-awake brain inside-out.*

I can feel it--you--Calli--oh, no, I haven't had this happen to me in months, it's crazy...

Is it? I don't think so. And you're not crazy, you're beautiful...

That isn't my mind speaking, either.

No, it isn't. It's me, Calli. I can hear you. I know you can hear me, too.

Green eyes blaze across the space between us. There's a river in her eyes, and a yellow ring like a sundog...

"Oh, dear God," I say. I start to get up out of my seat, though I can't tell you why. I don't know if I'm going to rush the stage or run out of the room! Everything is spinning. I wonder if I've got a fever. I thought I'd stopped hearing people's mind-voices, and I never expected anybody to hear me!

But du Baisser, with the strangest smile, holds me back.

"There's nothing wrong with you, Leluvo. Just sit down and listen," he murmurs.

His words come soft and rolling, with just the barest hint of the Louisiana-French accent he inherited from his father. The very sound of it quiets me enough to listen to her. The musician as well as the man listens, feeling again that subtle, twining sensation.

I know she's doing it...touching my mind, as nobody's ever touched it before. Where she touches me, it burns down past all thought and knowledge, into emotion,

instinct...into me.

She's marked you, man. What are you getting yourself into?

Nobody's ever heard me before. Let her leave her mark on me.

...nothing but the electric feel of her in my mind, and the ancient, primordial magic in her voice...

By the time she finishes the song, I'm half-way in love with her. I'm about to leap up and go to her, talk to her, drag her out of here before she can even begin her next song. I've got this mad notion that I'll take her back to San Francisco with me, ask her to be the heart of the band I'm even now organizing back there. I sense people are beginning to notice me, and yet I can't control myself.

"Rene, you have to listen to me..."

But Rene again holds me back. He's really smiling now, broadly, as I haven't seen him smile these two weeks.

"I've got to talk to her," I say. "You don't understand..."

"But, yes, I do," he says. His mahogany-colored hand falls lightly on mine. "Soon enough, she will come and speak with us. She heard you play tonight at the Fox, and she very much wishes to sing for you now."

I stare at him, shocked. Does he mean that he knows what she did, talked to me on that wavelength that nobody else ever had known how to reach? No, how could he know that? He probably thinks I've just got eyes for her something fierce, and he's not wrong about that. But I can't tell him about the mind thing, though--he'd think I was a few beats shy of the full measure.

I guess I should explain that I grew up thinking I was a freak because I'd always been able to hear what someone was thinking if they got too close to me. Maybe if I'd ever told Old Leluvo about it, he could have reassured me, explained my strange ability, taught me how to use it--he would have understood a thing like that. But it was my dark secret, I could never tell it to anyone, even though I was scared of it.

I've known people who wished they had this odd ability, but I wouldn't wish it on anybody. It could be misused. You don't just go poking around in somebody's mind for no reason any more than you go messing around with their musical instruments when they're gone--and I hated that feeling of intimacy I got when I'd pick up on somebody's thoughts. Mostly I'd pick up on really banal stuff, and that I could handle. But every so often I'd pick up on something horrible, like that guy in the bus seat ahead of me had bought a gun and was thinking of using it on somebody. That's when I'd get really scared.

I ran from my talent. I slammed doors on it.

For years, it rarely surfaced, but I knew it lurked, the way my Romany blood lurked with its memories and its survival-skill mysteries.

Looking back, I wonder if my years of roaming weren't as much my running away from myself as some expression of my inheritance from the Rom. Whatever the cause, I did roam. I left home at seventeen and never went back. I lied about my age, and as I could play damn well even back then, there was usually a club or burlie owner unscrupulous enough to hire me even if they surmised I wasn't even eighteen. I survived well enough. A couple of lucky breaks opened the way for me, and my talent did the rest. Now, at twenty-eight, I had all the work I could ask for, including this two-week stint with the Shadows, who were nothing if not incredible. And du Baisser himself was right up there with Miles and the other jazz superstars of the era...

And that's how I ended up here in this club...hearing Callina sing for the first time...feeling her enter my awareness, the peculiar personal inner space where most of us live forever alone and only dimly know it...

...there's only her voice, and the river, calling me...

She bows her head down again over the guitar, but not before I've seen her odd, catlike little smile. I wonder if I'm going crazy. Her skin glows with a radiance that has nothing to do with the dim lighting...

*In this instant, I get the strangest sensation, like deja vu. Except that I'm reliving something...**that hasn't happened yet.***

...I see her in San Francisco. She's onstage, her hair flying, a red Rickenbacker twelve-string slung around her neck, flashing cherry sparks as she dances. For just an instant, I see other musicians--she's the lead vocalist in the band.

Behind the black drums--familiar as my own face in the mirror--I see myself...

One

Jonnah Greskin, the youngest member of Magical Merlin's road crew, gathered up the last of the empty anvil cases from the Carousel Ballroom stage. He'd helped to set up the Sunn PA, and tested out the new mikes for Calli and Mark, and the monitor speakers lining the front of the stage. The only thing the road crew didn't do was set up the drums. Paul invariably did that himself, and he'd finished over an hour ago. It wasn't that he didn't think the roadies could do the job right, Paul had told Jonnah, it was just that he was so used to doing it that it had become a kind of calming ritual for him, a meditation that put him in the proper frame of mind to play.

As Jonnah and his friend Anna from high school pulled chairs from backstage so that they could watch from the curtain-hung wings, silence fell on the stage and the lights blacked out.

"Are you okay?" Jonnah asked Anna. The girl tossed back waist-length dark hair and nodded, but Jonnah had already seen a new bruise on her smooth cheek, and traces of tears dried around her eyes.

"Did your stepdad hit you again?" he whispered.

She nodded again, briefly; her lips compressed as if she stifled tears or an angry word. Then she sighed, and relaxed, her gaze focused on the stage.

"He tried to stop me from coming here," she said softly. "He's so crazy. He thinks all the bands are the tools of the Devil. He took my Magical Merlin record and smashed it--I was so mad, but I didn't dare argue--he hits so hard when he's been drinking."

Jonnah was ashamed of his own happiness in his new job, and his relatively comfortable home life for an instant. Anna Sampson, whom he'd known for over a year, had, since her mother's death, lived alone with her stepfather, Fletcher, who had lost his job as a preacher and now spent his days--and his unemployment checks --on booze. When he was liquored up, he beat on Anna. Jonnah wondered if that's all he did--but Anna would just shut up if he mentioned it. He was scared that Fletch might try something else, because one time Anna had almost admitted that Fletch sometimes *touched her...* Jonnah wished he could beat the guy into Jello, but Fletch was a big man--he weighed over two hundred and fifty pounds. And Anna wouldn't call the cops on him, because, she said, if she did, he'd just beat her worse--like he had her mother.

Jonnah, who still lived at home, wished he could invite her to live with him, but they weren't even boyfriend and girlfriend, just pals, although Jonnah thought that sometimes Anna looked at him as if she liked him as more than "just a friend".

"Stop worrying, Jonnah, and let's just listen to the music," Anna said. "At least I got here tonight, so I want to enjoy it as much as I can." She grinned at him, and accepted the joint he'd just lighted.

His heart thumped unevenly at that grin and the warmth he saw in her eyes. Shyly he laid his arm across her shoulders.

"You really like me, Anna?" he blurted.

She laughed out loud at his surprise. "You didn't think I hated you, did you?"

"Well, no, but..."

"Jonnah, I really do like you." she said, and stopped short at some unspoken thought. He saw the blood rise to her face as she looked at him. "Nobody's ever put their arm around me...like that...before."

If she or Jonnah pictured for one ironic moment the image of Fletcher Sampson, neither of them said so. He touched her long hair, rejoicing in the way it veiled her body with its shadowy beauty. Her eyes were pools deep in some wild wood, and her shoulders trembled a little beneath his arm.

* * *

I slid into my place behind the black drums, wrapped my hand round a big sheepskin-covered mallet and pounded softly, then harder, on the great Chinese gong. Its voice rose into brassy, deathless thunder with a hissing overtone, so loud you wanted to run away from it.

I am the sound of the opening door of magic, that voice roared, *Ignore me at your peril*.

As the voice of the gong began to fade, Calli in her long green velvet dress leaped high, brandishing the Rickenbacker twelve-string as if it were a torch that flashed cherry fire across the hall. She stamped her foot as she landed, and on that echoing beat I whacked out the opening count of "Highways and Airways," our acid-rock anthem that had gone straight to gold last summer. Mick's bass fell into its stride beside me, the Rickenbacker chimed out the driving minor-key chords, Mark's noble Les Paul drove ghostly feedback to the heavens, and Calli's voice came soaring effortlessly over everything.

As the light show deployed its arsenal of hallucinatory effects across the huge old hall, I watched Calli and Mark and Mickey flickering before me, the strobe light catching their motions and shattering them into old-fashioned moving pictures.

Kids flung flowers onto the stage, roses and carnations. Balloons wafted above the pandemonium, weightless dreams tossed and batted like so many multicolored buoys in the sea of listeners and dancers. Veils of smoke rose up into the lightshow-haunted shadows. Backstage, too, pungent drifts of smoke rose as roadies and friends got ready for the ride.

But there were some folks there who hadn't come to party, though of course I didn't know that then.

At one of the small tables by the concession counter, two men watched the band and spoke in voices pitched low to carry through the violent tide of layered sound. Neither the music nor the light show appeared to please them, despite their attentiveness.

"Other than the way she jumped four feet in the air, I see no evidence that she behaves in a suspect manner," said one. "And there are mortals who could do as much." His shaggy black hair hung below his collar, contrasting with oddly pale skin and matching cool grey eyes. He could appear handsome or brutish by turns. Just now he seemed to smoulder, despite the coldness of his looks, as the other spoke.

"Strigo, you know what she is; she should not engage in this intimacy with mortals. I speak of her fellow musicians. I have every reason to believe that she has already broken the law of secrecy; how could she keep them from the truth, living with them as she must? How else does she travel with them? No, I do not think I am mistaken," said the other, pushing his longish silver hair back from his high forehead. He flicked owl-yellow eyes from Strigo's face to the stage, where Calli and Mark and Mickey had swung round to face Paul and now began to bring the volume slowly down. The guitars trailed strands of liquid notes across the smoky

air, and the drums shivered the smoke, even when they were played quietly.

Both Strigo and Charn felt it then, a wave of emotion that came rising like a wind on the music. It swept the hall, calling out in a piercing, yearning voice; it linked together any minds prescient enough to hear it--and everyone heard it. Calli's voice and the red Rickenbacker sang poignant notes that seemed to hang, glowing above the stage, painting shifting images in the smoke. You might have thought the light show crew was projecting slides into the darkness above the dance floor, but they weren't.

The images rose on the sweet jangle of the 12-string, the high G keening like the wind...

...water, silk-in-mouth sweet living dancing river water, reflecting on a thousand green leaves... dirt road shining dusty golden in summer sunset, see the old wooden-wheeled wagon rumbling along, and the shaggy-haired child perched on the high seat behind sure-footed horses, see his somehow foreign face, and his strange raptor's eyes...the yellow scent of new hay and the coolness of approaching evening...the nearby hill, and the ancient ruin where secret histories breathe cold in the moonlight after the sun has gone...see the ghost, the golden-eyed mystery where he walks alone by the silver river...

"Now do you believe me?" demanded Charn, his yellow eyes firing with icy anger and his every syllable a block of blue ice from some place where summer wasn't even a word. "Do you believe now, Strigo? You think nothing of it, that she but plays the minor goddess here and there is no harm in it? Can you not comprehend that even if she has not yet told anyone the truth, it can only be a matter of time before such visions as this one, which she has broadcast for mortal and immortal alike to decipher, begin to be understood? Surely you must agree that it would require nothing more than for one of these befuddled young mortals to inadvertently see her feed, for all our lives to be endangered. She is far too well-known; mortals would hunt her down and kill her or worse yet, take her into the captivity of their science, and others of the Blood would be hunted were our existence to become known. Why else is there a law of secrecy but to prevent such occurrences? No, Strigo, to tell of us, even in such fantasy images as she has painted, is forbidden! To reveal ourselves to a mortal not marked for death or transformation is a crime, Strigo, or had you forgotten?"

"I forget nothing," snarled Strigo bitterly. "But I do not see that she taunts her audiences with the truth. I have neither seen nor heard anything that would alert a mortal to her true nature. It is true that the ghost, or spirit we saw in the vision...resembled... But her mortal audiences don't know that, do they? It was not apparent to me that even she knew what she was doing..."

"Her adorers have only to look more closely at Callina herself to make a guess, if they should be curious," replied Charn. "Have you become besotted with this young one, Strigo? Is this the reason for your refusal to see the danger clearly?"

"Oh, danger...it is not without beauty," said Strigo absently. He shook himself, and looked across the table at Charn for a long moment. Something sudden as sickness rippled across his face; abruptly he lurched to his feet, nearly upsetting his chair. He leaned close to Charn; nobody else could have heard his words, nor the venom in them.

"Charn, speak no more to me of Callina now. I will listen to her music, and I will form my own conclusions while I am able to do so. The Council may wish me to make my observations with your guidance and, presumably, to learn from you, but they cannot dictate that I share your opinions."

He strode away and vanished, a shadow among a thousand shadows in the light-spattered crowd. He hid himself so well that Charn could not see him.

Charn let him go, knowing that Strigo would return after he'd slaked his temper--and his thirst.

Onstage, caught in the confusion of light, we played on, bodies and souls linked in the magical intimacy that came from Calli and embraced us all...

Two

A ghost of Highway One, the ancient bleached carcass of a Ford pickup truck waited, idling, at the overlook. From its looks, its rolling days were long past, but its driver had brought it up this narrow switchbacking road above the Golden Gate with no difficulty.

Behind the spider-webbed windshield, the shadows congealed, concealing the occupants. But their voices carried on the cold sea breeze.

"Uribe's letter said nothing about killing anyone, Charn. As I told you at the Fillmore, I was ordered only to observe any young ones we discovered, not to initiate contact unless it seemed propitious to do so, nor was I to engage in any conflict with any, save as necessary for self-defense."

Strigo spoke, his voice seeming to belong to these water-locked woods. Like a stone cracking with ice in its veins it was, but rough with something that might have been warmth.

But Charn's voice held no such possibility. When he spoke, his utterances were implacable as glaciers.

"Ah, but did not Uribe also acquaint you with the Council's expectation that you would fulfill your mission with my guidance?"

Strigo's eyes glowed briefly red behind the blind windshield.

"Yes, that is what is expected of me should I wish to be recognized by the Council. But I tell you, I'm less and less certain that I want or need that recognition if this passing judgment upon unknown and untried fledglings is any indication of what is truly required. And though you consider me young and untested, I understand what Uribe expects of me, and therefore I cannot help but think you work alone, to ends of your own choosing."

"That's as it may be; it is not your place to question me. Do you intend to disobey me, Strigo?"

Far below, on the switchbacking road, headlights crept closer. The distinctive two-step of a VW beetle motor echoed up through the canyons.

"I don't believe the Council would back your decision to destroy Callina this way, without ever speaking to her, without ever discovering whether her behavior was deliberate or the result of untaught use of her abilities... It makes no sense to me. I would at least be interested in conversing with Callina before you destroy her."

The honed edge of Charn's laughter shrilled in the ears of small wet-furred creatures in the waiting woods.

"I might have guessed as much from your foolish expression as you watched her little moving picture," he scoffed. "Fortunate it was that her audience was far too befuddled with hashish to recognize their own danger. And you should have attempted to speak with her backstage if you wanted to that badly. It is too late now."

"I am not ashamed to admit that I was...affected...by her performance, Charn. The Blood has produced many memorable artists in the past, and I believe Callina would be numbered among the finest, should she survive. Furthermore, I suspect you were moved by her music as well, despite its unfamiliar idioms and the little pictures she made."

"She is repulsive; she is wanton; I perceive nothing appealing about her," growled the other. Strigo's face twisted for an instant in a terrible snarl; then

he regained his composure and continued.

"You are to be pitied then. I cannot agree with your opinion that she poses so great a danger to the rest of the Blood that she must be summarily destroyed before the Council can even convene as is proper. She is not that dangerous, not as she is at present. Even her psychic games are no more than fledgling flights, the sort of thing a psychic mortal could broadcast. Mortals have many legends besides those that tell of us, do they not? I have listened to talk in this city, as perhaps you have not, and although there are strange tales told of this Callina, none come near the truth. Her mortal audiences believe she is one of them, but specially gifted--which she is, no matter what else she is. And, perhaps rightly, they credit the feelings of intimacy they experience during her concerts to the effects of the band's music and perhaps to hashish."

His grey eyes gleamed again with cold red light.

"And I cannot help but question your assertion that you were unaffected by her, Charn. For what other reason, save that she has aroused your hatred, have you shadowed her and her fellows to ascertain that she and her mortal consort would travel by this road tonight?"

The clatter and grind of the VW gears poked through the walls of fog for a moment, then faded.

Charn's short laugh was a crevasse cracking open in black ice. Then the glacier spoke again.

"I am certainly not required to debate the matter further, Strigo, and I would advise you not to repeat such opinions in the future. Mordaunt obviously permitted you to speak far too freely, and the result is that you air thoughts much better left unspoken."

"The excellent Mordaunt is easily made uncomfortable by any reference to ideas or considerations which fall outside the self-imposed limits of his world. He would have silenced me, had he been able, but he held no rein over me save in the beginning, nor do you now," growled Strigo.

Silence fell between them. Foghorns somewhere down below sounded dirge-like call-and-response across the dark gulf of the Golden Gate.

"I find it passing strange, Charn, that you who have taken part in the Council all these years should now turn aside from the high law which forbids us to kill our own kind. Do the laws no longer matter when the power belongs to you? Or do you merely use your standing in Council to secretly further your own ambitions at the expense of others?"

"You forget yourself again, my insolent young Strigo. But as to that, your bad manners match your ignorance. I suppose you will tell me that it has never occurred to you that you stand to gain as much as any, should I become Master of this city?"

"I don't give a poxy damn whether you or Mordaunt or the eldest elder in the Council take the Mastery--or tumble into the sea with it," said Strigo. "Younger than you I am, but I'm no longer fascinated by the politics of power; do not such concerns stink of mortal pettiness? I see that you are truly a hypocrite, Charn; you uphold no law, defend no right. You intend to destroy Callina because you have seen her strength and you fear the outcome should she turn against you in your bid for power here in her city."

"You tempt a fate equal to hers with your seditious ranting," hissed Charn. "I will do what must be done. She cannot threaten me! It is all of our Blood whom she endangers with her wanton behavior!"

Strigo's answer was a wordless growl curling on the wind.

"The moment is at hand," warned Charn at the end of an ugly little silence loud with unspoken threats. "Callina very likely will not survive what lies in

wait for her tonight. Certainly her mortal lover Paul Leluvo will not, even if she does. If so, the loss of him will assuredly weaken her, and it will be merely a matter of some little time before I find her--or she gives herself up to me. I will tolerate no lawless fledglings in this city."

"And if she has a maker of greater power than herself, of whom you know nothing? Have you considered the other members of her band? Do you intend to destroy them all?" asked Strigo. "And furthermore, do you imagine that if Uribe or Andrzej should chance to observe what we do tonight that your bid for power in the West would have a cat's chance in Hades? And--how can you be certain that you will survive a crash intended to destroy Callina?"

Charn laughed again. "Why should Uribe watch me, Strigo? Do you not think he is more likely to watch you?"

Wind pushed fog in the open truck windows.

Suddenly Charn lifted his head, hearing a call that rang out in the silence as if it had been spoken aloud.

Charn--this is Uribe del Castellano, can you hear me?

"Damn him and the Council to the nethermost hells," muttered Charn. "Strigo, I will not answer him now. Later will be sufficient. They will not seek me for long; I could be hunting."

"I expected you to say as much," said Strigo quite softly.

Foglight illuminated Charn's face, folds and furrows a landscape containing two ancient pools of yellow quicksand. He ignored Strigo's comment and ducked his silver head, leaning fluidly out into the night, listening.

Charn, will you reply? Strigo, are you there? Can you hear me? Andrzej and Mordaunt wish to speak with you as well.

The sound of the laboring VW engine was much closer.

Strigo gritted his teeth, waiting for his mentor's next orders. He wondered if he should answer the elders once Charn had taken off alone in the truck.

"Into the trees with you. Be ready to run when you see me abandon the vehicle. There must be no sign of us here."

Charn glared at Strigo, hating the careless shaggy black hair and the century-old insolence in those grey eyes.

"We must ascertain that Callina dies, Strigo. Do I make myself quite clear? I shall expect to see you in the City before dawn."

Strigo slid out of the truck and stood staring coldly at Charn.

Without waiting for Strigo's reply, Charn gunned the old V8 to life and swung out onto Highway One.

Uribe, Strigo called, *I hear you. Charn hears you too, but he will not answer.*

Where are you, Strigo?

Mount Tamalpais. We wait for Callina Russell.

In a dimly lighted, lushly furnished suite high on Nob Hill, the three elders of the Council of Vampires, having heard Strigo's silent call, looked at each other for a long moment.

"Waiting for Callina? What do you suppose Charn intends to do?" asked Uribe, his blond good looks marred by a ferocious scowl. "Surely she cannot have agreed to meet him in that godforsaken place?"

"Why not? Perhaps the fledgling fancies the outdoors. Though it doesn't sound likely, does it? Perhaps Charn is plotting again," replied Mordaunt languidly.

His air of almost foppish disdain could not conceal his true, and immense, power.

"Strigo does not seem in accord with Charn, whatever's afoot," suggested Andrzej. His accent echoed his origins, though it had been over sixty years since he'd last seen Poland.

"Strigo has never agreed with any of us about anything, not since the day he was made," said Mordaunt a little bitterly.

"You are hardly the first to discover that the passionate mortal makes the most difficult fledgling, Mordaunt. But in this case I must agree with Strigo, if he no longer trusts Charn," insisted Andrzej. "I think we must attempt to observe this meeting, though I dislike invading his privacy. Strigo may be rebellious, yet he answered us when his superior failed to do so."

The three turned the lights down even further, and returned to their soft chairs. They linked their minds in the way of the Blood and cast their awareness out into the night, across the bridge and up the winding highway towards the spark of Strigo's unshielded awareness. Silently they spoke to one another as they watched.

Strigo runs beside the road; Charn drives the vehicle. Strigo is not pleased, but he still obeys.

Yes, one of them answered, *but now I can taste his anger towards Charn in this matter. Perhaps Charn plans to try and kill Callina, and Strigo has spoken out of turn about it?*

Charn has no authority to destroy another of the Blood. That is a Council decision, not his to make alone.

We must watch.

* * *

Strigo easily out-paced the truck's rumbling progress at first, running lightly along the narrow mountain road. He could clearly hear the sputtering VW as it climbed up towards him in the fog.

The truck passed him then, gaining speed. Strigo, detesting the wetness coursing down his collar from his soaking hair, lengthened his wolfish stride towards the place where the vehicles must pass each other--or meet.

Then the VW came clattering around the last steep curve. As it came, faintly above the engine racket Strigo thought he heard distant but unmistakable laughter.

Charn? he wondered. *Or Callina?*

Headlight beams reached and met, making ghosts in the fog between them.

Then the night burst asunder in a mighty explosion. Metal shrapnel flew past Strigo's head, one sharp sliver slicing his cheek.

He glimpsed Charn leaping clear of the exploding truck and racing into the trees, but he felt no pleasure in the knowledge that the elder had survived. Charn didn't seem to be making sure that his plan had succeeded, either--he was gone into the woods.

Strigo sped towards the burning mess blocking the highway. The VW was broken and crushed against the hood of the blazing remains of the truck, but it wasn't yet completely in flames. Perhaps, despite his own terror of fire, he could get near enough to ascertain if Callina or her mortal companion were still alive within the car.

But before he could get anywhere near it, another explosion rocked the two shattered vehicles and a wall of white fire reached out towards Strigo almost faster than he could run from it.

Charn took no chances, he thought. *There must have been gasoline in those cans he had in the back of the truck. No fledgling, let alone a mortal, could have survived that explosion.*

As the faint wail of sirens from north and south began to converge on the

pyre. Strigo turned and slipped into the trees, heading down into the ravines. Dawn was only a few hours distant; by then he wanted to be back in his safe haven in the city, waiting for daylight to bind him over to sleep. He'd face Charn when he could no longer avoid him; it wasn't a pleasant prospect. He wanted to kill Charn, though he couldn't have said for certain why.

Strigo hoped he wouldn't dream about this night. But he already knew he would.

For as he loped tirelessly, his shape the shadow of a black wolf running down towards the Golden Gate Bridge, her face haunted him, as if her ghost cried for him to avenge her death.

Callina...

As Strigo vanished into the woods, a tall, wide-shouldered figure cloaked in something darker than the night emerged from the shadows on the far side of the road. Leaping right into the midst of the blaze, he stooped down like some great dark bird. Smouldering metal flew up into the air, raining fire down on him as he bounded clear of the wreck. One small figure clung to his cloak; he cradled another in his arms.

He ran swiftly with them both into the woods, vanishing into the darkness even more quickly than Strigo and Charn had.

When the rescue teams arrived and managed to subdue the flames, they discovered that there was no one in either vehicle. It was highly improbable that no traces would remain of either driver's body, but that was exactly what the fire-fighters and paramedics found--nothing. Their search through the surrounding woods continued into the early morning.

But their diligence was no match for the efforts of that one who, hidden by more than the darkness of his cloak, sent forth the power of his mind to ensure that their search would fail.

Deep in the eucalyptus woods, Callina Russell knelt over the barely-living body of her mortal lover, Paul. He could still hear her, though he could no longer speak, as she held him in her arms and cried terrible bloody tears that dripped onto his cold face.

And the dark-cloaked mystery, he who had lifted them from the inferno on the highway, who had prevented the rescue teams from stumbling upon them, hovered, watching her, waiting to see what she would do.

But he could not intervene; that was not the way things worked. Charn might plot and plan, but he himself could only wait, and watch.

His name was Marcel de Reynardine. Once he had been an Impressionist painter, in that age when gaslights gilded Paris, when his glorious canvases celebrating the ivory and ebony allure of the gauze-clad dancer Marliese Hasse blazed from the walls of the galleries, and his own face was as well-known as hers.

Now he was all but invisible, and fame long ago abandoned. He thought of himself as a sort of architect of the imagination. He knew that he had become part of an evolutionary process, and he understood his place and his function within that process. That understanding had brought lasting peace within his grasp.

He waited long enough to be positive that Callina had succeeded. Then he left.

He did not know that Paul Leluvo, caught between death and immortality, had seen him.

* * *

Three

"Ginger, Ginger, who are you,
child of the life we live,
Twisted is the road that brought you here
Deadly is the love you give..."

Magical Merlin's Band, "Legend of the Ginger Child"

Bare-bones consciousness. Then a mote in the dark.

Where am I?
Body?
No answer.
Arms? Legs? Eyes?
The darkness boiled, resolved.

Nighttime. Outdoors. Wetness on my face.

I couldn't move.

In the distance, I thought a freight train cried.

I couldn't move my body at all, couldn't feel anything below my neck.

I smelled smoke and burned flesh.

Mine?

Fog bathed my face. I should have been cold, but I wasn't; just scared. What a way to die, alone in the wet darkness.

Train was closer. I wondered who was on it.

Another door opened on memory.

We were driving on Mt. Tamalpais. Calli was in the passenger seat, her window open wide just like always, no matter how cold the wind. She was singing; I was flying.
The blue bird of happiness was our hood ornament, leading the way.
"I'm thinking I should ask you to marry me."
Her hair lifted and fell in the wind as we rounded the outside of a ridge and turned back inland. I couldn't see her face but I felt her smile.
"I did wonder if you were going to ask me tonight."
"And you say you're not a mind reader, love? Or am I so obvious?"
"It's true, it's true. But it's one of your most lovable characteristics."
"That and my invincible sense of rhythm."
"Why are drummers always so full of themselves?"

Silly laughter. Her hair traced my face as she leaned across the Bug to kiss

me.

Out of the fog came unbelievable, sudden grinding of gears. Too stunned even to try and swerve, I watched the derelict-looking truck careen towards us out of the mist, locked on a collision course. I barely glimpsed a white face behind the windshield, then a blur, as if the driver had ducked. Calli screamed; I heard myself roaring in rage and terror. Then the darkness came.

I never felt the impact...knew nothing now beyond the fact of lying here with no idea how I got out of the wreck of the car, or anything else...

Calli, what happened?

Calli, where are you?

Light flickered far off to my left. I could just turn my head to look.

Fire boiled up from a distant spot that might have been two vehicles married together across Highway One.

The holocaust vanished in sudden thick darkness, though the yellow fire still burned behind my eyelids.

A black cat, the biggest black cat I ever saw, stood at my elbow. Its slanted eyes, green garnets sewn into midnight sky, captured me and reeled me in...

I'm gone.

Somewhere else...river sounds call me, and blinding sunlight. The island lies athwart the current; it's a glorified sand bar that hasn't been covered by water in seasons. This is my fort, my castle, my tower for playing knight or soldier. How old am I? Eight or nine...

I'm really here. I step forward into the light.

Then I remember that I can't move...

I woke up cold and in pain.

The cat lay on my chest, its eyes an inch from mine. They were the twin headlights of the train, and its roaring purr was the rumble of the coal-fired behemoth.

And I couldn't move.

Give me your life.

What? Who spoke?

Nobody spoke. I thought; you heard. I'm Cat.

Right, I thought. *I must be done for; I'm lying here, carrying on a mental conversation with a cat.*

You want me to give you my life? What do you mean? Not like there's much left of it worth fighting over, is there?

That is true. You are dying. It's the end of the line, Paul Leluvo. Last stop for mortality.

Too much. A psychic cat that knows my name.

Spoked wheels of pain bore down on me. Senses converged and dispersed. Awareness dimmed.

If I'm dying, what do you want with my life?

Somehow I still breathed through the agony. It had been easier when I couldn't feel anything at all.

I can make you immortal, whispered Cat.

Immortal? But all smashed up? I'd rather die, thanks.

You will be as you were before this night, and you will be immortal. Give me your life and I will show you.

I don't believe in immortality. I'm mortal, whatever you are. Why do you want me?

Because.

An old memory rose foolishly to what was left of my mind, singsonging with a

strange insistence.

When I was just a kid, I used to hang around Old Leluvo, my great-grandfather, the one who'd never liked sleeping in a house, while he told me all the superstitions he'd learned in his childhood wandering Eastern Europe. He told me wild tales of things that went abroad by night, or appeared only in the dark of moon; of were-beasts that weren't the commonplace animals they seemed. Old Leluvo knew their names and their habits. As I listened, I realized that this stuff was as real to him as I was, as I sat there with my eyes as big as quarters.

"Beyond the painted sunlit scrim," he said musingly, "another world stalks ours as the cat stalks its delight."

I asked him what he meant by that, but he abruptly changed the subject, scowling.

"Those are just old superstitions, not for the likes of us," he insisted. "Besides, there are things it is unwise to dwell upon."

I'd forgotten all about that conversation as the years passed. Now I remembered that he'd unnerved me with his talk, yet I'd told myself that I would never believe a word of it, and that such ignorant superstitions had nothing to do with me.

And this is the middle of the twentieth century, Grandfather, not a hundred years ago. Maybe the blood of the horse people, the wanderers, still drives me, but I don't believe all those superstitions. Werewolves and ghosts and--vampires?

For a child of the Rom, you're remarkably stupid. Truth stares you in the face and you deny it, while your mortal death hunts through your cells. Choose now, Paul Leluvo, before all is lost.

What the hell. I'm going to die, a vampire wants to drink me dry. Now there's some bad poetry, but I'm not at my best, sorry. Cat, you can have what's left of my life, much good may it do you. I just wish...

What do you wish?

That I could have said goodbye to Calli. I could die easier if I knew she was okay...

Cat's green eyes blurred in strange red tears. I'd never seen a cat cry. Then Cat was gone, seeming to leap clear over me, a black-velvet bridge to the unknown...and then it was Calli holding my smashed body in her thin arms, her hair falling all over my face. She cried, and her tears were full of blood, and all the little deaths of autumn were in her hair.

Don't cry, my darling. Be with me here at the end, that's enough.

I could hardly believe she was there. Maybe she wasn't, really.

Then she lifted her head. Though she was crying those awful tears, she was smiling that cat smile of hers, the one she wore on our first record cover, the kind of smile that never showed her teeth.

Her tears really looked like blood, I wasn't imagining that. Was she hurt inside somewhere too?

But then her mouth opened, and I saw what I'd never seen before in a year of loving her and thinking I knew her as much as anyone might ever.

Saint Sara, look in her mouth. I've kissed her a hundred thousand times and never seen what I see now.

Calli? Where'd Cat go? Or are you Cat?

Listen to me. Paul. Or you will die before I can... I've never...

She hesitated, crying softly. I could hear the freight train through her sobbing, though Cat was nowhere to be seen. Death was closer now, careening me on toward the morning I wasn't going to see. I closed my eyes as all my senses began to dilate and then fade. Pain was bigger than anything else...

Then Cat's voice shocked me awake again.

I have to try it. Listen to me, my love. You must follow me, follow the trees water light dancing--follow the drums.

Drums? There was a familiar concept in this nightmare out of Hesse my life had become. Listening, I never felt her fangs bite down. Maybe I was dead already.

But no, my heart thundered like a hundred horses. Green light beat on me, sunlight wavered on the water beyond the island...and the beat of the drum somewhere was the only thing that mattered, the cold salt wind on my face, and that drum rumbling between my ears...I clung to that comforting sound, I embraced it, I told it I loved the drums beyond anything...

Drink.

Sudden smoky heat filled my mouth, and a taste like incense or fragrant wine. I opened my eyes to the mist, dimly made out Calli's white face in a dark tangle of sodden hair.

She shoved her torn wrist against my nerveless mouth. The wine was her blood.

You must drink from me now that I have drunk from you.

The incense lighted a fire in my senses. I struggled, swallowed liquid smoke. Once, twice, three times...

...Unmade, unraveled, finally unbound, screaming in a voice not my own, I clawed free of the crawling darkness. Give me the light, give me more than this moment beyond death's sideshow haunted house...

Soul spinning at the lonesome crossroads--Calli, which way home?

Back into wet clinging darkness I fell. But...changed.

Then pain returned, all my previous pain played backwards, a searing lightning stroke that burned and blazed from the base of my spine to my brain, and sent me into darkness again.

But when I struggled back to consciousness, Calli was in my arms--and I could feel her now! I could feel my arms and legs, the agony still racing along my nerves. But even as I paid attention to these sensations they began to fade.

And my body was my own again--I thought. I was wrong, naturally.

I sat up, holding on to her with all my strength. She was deathly cold in my arms, crying and shivering. So was I.

"Whatever you did, it worked," I said. It sounded inane, but those were the only words I could find.

She lifted her terrible bloodstained face to mine.

"Yes, it worked. And I hope and pray you'll forgive me when you understand what I've done--and what you've become."

"My love... Whatever it is I've become... I'm like you now, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are. Did you know... Did you ever guess what I was?"

"That you weren't quite an ordinary human being? I never thought you were ordinary, love. But I never knew what you were, as you put it. I'm not sure I know now, for that matter. All I know is that a few minutes ago I was lying here singing the fixin'-to-die-rag and then I didn't die."

"Yes, you did," she said in a whisper. "If you hadn't followed the drums, you would have died. And even though we've survived this night, we are still in danger."

"Why? Wasn't it just an accident?"

I heard the sibilant hiss of Cat's voice in my mind.

No, it was not. You still don't know what I am? Paul, my darling, I am a vampire...and so are you. And what happened on this highway tonight says we are in danger, but who was in that truck, or why he tried to kill us, or who pulled us from the wreck, I don't know, any more than you...

Calli rose to her feet in one fluidly swift motion, before I could frame so much as an exclamation. I hadn't even seen her move. And I'd never seen her move that fast in the year I'd lived with her.

"Come on," she said anxiously, "we have to get out of here before the rescue team--or someone else--finds us."

"I saw someone earlier. When I was almost dead."

"What did he look like?"

"I couldn't see his face. He wore the darkness for clothes..."

She nodded. "Somebody pulled us out of the car. I never saw his face, only his black cloak..."

She was growing more agitated by the moment, so I stood up when she tugged on my arm, and followed her flickering pale light down into the woods, toward San Francisco and home.

My eyes were full of splintered light, my feet hardly touched the ground, and my mind reeled with questions upon questions...

* * *

Their undisturbed vigil at an end, the three watchers broke their psychic link and stared at one another. For once, none of them had a word to say.

Finally Uribe sighed, a curiously mortal sound.

"You were quite correct, Andrzej. Charn plots, indeed."

Andrzej nodded his sleek dark head. "I feared as much. His ambitions outstrip his sensibilities at last."

"But was he successful?" asked Mordaunt. "I saw only the burning vehicles, nothing else."

"I'm not certain just what I saw," said Uribe slowly. He bowed his sleek golden head, lost for a moment in thought.

Four

"You said that I could break away
Into new places and dimensions
Babe I wonder your intentions
Lock us up, keep dark the day..."

Magical Merlin's Band, "Highways and Airways"

In his safe haven, hidden away in the hills north of Larkspur, Marcel de Reynardine settled himself in his comfortable bed and waited for sleep to claim him. But, strangely, it was dilatory. He couldn't forget what he'd done, and what he'd seen. The burns he'd received when he plunged into the burning wreck were not really serious, and the pain they caused him only nagged at the edges of his awareness. More serious was his concern for the two he had pulled from the flames. He wished he were permitted to contact them openly, but that was not the way he had been instructed to work.

Remain unseen, and ensure their survival, the voice had said in his dream. The voice spoke neither English nor Marcel's native French, nor any other language he'd ever heard spoken in his wanderings, yet in the dreams he always understood, as he understood his relationship to those who spoke to him.

I will go into the City, and see where they live, he told himself. *I must know that they both live, and that Charn's deviltry has not harmed those whom my ancient ones would preserve. If Leluvo has survived the Change, then it is time for the dreams to begin...*

* * *

Charn caught up to Strigo before Strigo came to ground for the day. The old one looked even paler than usual, and his yellow eyes glowed fanatically.

"Did you do as I told you?" he demanded.

Strigo favored him with a weary, dumbfounded gaze.

"Do what?"

"Make certain that they died," said Charn between his teeth.

"How did you expect me to do what you could not? I couldn't get within ten meters of the fire," answered Strigo dully. "If I was not able to stand it, how was anyone within to survive? I did not know you had cans of gasoline in the back of the truck. You might have killed me as well, though I suppose that would please you almost as much as knowing that you had destroyed Callina."

Charn glowered but chose--wisely--not to answer. Others besides Mordaunt had, over the years, told tales of Strigo's rage, and Charn, though twice Strigo's age, had no desire to wake the sleeping wolf.

"The fire burned well?" was all he asked.

Strigo shot him a glance full of disgust.

"When I attempted to approach, flames leaped up more quickly than I could run. I was nearly caught."

Charn nodded to himself. *Good,* he thought. *That takes care of the most visible of the fledglings. I will find the others, if others exist. I will root them out. I will suffer none to live save those who come into being at my command. And if Strigo does not cease to defy me, he may suffer a similar fate.*

* * *

"What now, Uribe?" asked Andrzej. "You assigned Strigo to Charn. Do you feel that the orders should stand unaltered?"

Uribe stared out at the glittering city, pale iridescence playing on his skin in the soft light.

"I think we must let it be for now," he finally said. "Strigo cannot come into the Council, though he is of an age to be considered, while he remains unable to cooperate with another. We have dissenters enough as it is."

"He may certainly refuse to fulfill your orders, though, should he have a major disagreement with Charn," argued Andrzej. "And I am not certain he should be censured for his disobedience in such a case. We ourselves now doubt Charn's motives. Is it not somewhat unfair to leave Strigo in such a position?"

"So far we have no real knowledge of Charn's activities," said Uribe slowly. "Until we determine what he is trying to do, we cannot make any judgment of him. I wish I knew what was in his mind. I asked him merely to observe, as I asked Strigo to observe the fledglings native to this place. There was no mention of aggressive actions against them, such as I think we have seen tonight. If Charn was successful--and it did appear that he was--in destroying one of the young ones, we will, however, be required to investigate. He must not take such matters into his own hands."

"Charn has long styled himself a vigilante," grumbled Andrzej. "I do not know what he has discovered about the young ones of this city, but obviously something has threatened him so much that he has taken independent action to rid himself of the threat."

"To one corrupted by power, all other power is a threat," said Uribe thoughtfully, "And Charn has ever lusted for power. I believe he seeks to win the Mastery of San Francisco, now that the Council has begun to assess it. Perhaps his existence in the Netherlands has become precarious, and he wishes to establish himself in a more congenial environment."

"Then let him nominate himself for the Master's position, and prove to all the Council that he is worthy of it," said Andrzej. "It appears to me that we have

surprised him in the process of bidding for power without benefit of any Council proceedings."

"Perhaps," said Mordaunt sourly, "Charn has been watching too many mortal Western films, and they have begun to infect him with foolishness."

"We must discover what truly occurred tonight," said Mordaunt. "Uribe, what do you suggest? Should we contact Strigo, and see what he may tell us?"

"Perhaps. There is one thing, however, that makes me very curious," said the blond elder, his deep-green eyes somber. "Did none of you notice that the fire surrounding the accident was...not quite what it seemed?"

There was a silence, while they replayed the scene in their minds: the darkness, and the fire, and Strigo, a flickering silhouette against the glare.

"The fire...its color...I did not see this before," said Andrzej strangely. "It seemed to change, just at the moment when Strigo attempted to approach."

"Exactly," agreed Uribe. "I saw a wall of white fire, which seemed to leap out and surround the smaller vehicle. The truck was indeed burning as Strigo approached, but the fire was yellow and orange, and very smoky. What do you think caused the fire to suddenly change? Not the gasoline, I think, nor were the materials in the two vehicles so dissimilar as to cause such an abrupt alteration in the appearance of the fire. Besides, the smaller vehicle was not yet actually burning, although it was full of smoke."

They exchanged startled glances as the significance of this sank home in their minds.

"That was no natural fire," said Andrzej. "But who made it? And for what purpose? Could Charn have possibly done it, to drive Strigo away, or destroy him as well?"

"I think not," said Uribe shortly. "Charn has no such ability with fire, or has never owned to it in the years I have known him. His powers are considerable, naturally, but his strength lies in his ability to dominate others, not in the manipulation of natural elements. And as to the possible purpose of calling up such a blaze..."

His voice trailed off; the others looked at him curiously.

"I have no idea who made the white fire," he finally said. "But I agree with Andrzej that the timing of it was peculiar, and like as not significant. Were I to speculate, I would guess that the white fire was the work of a creature of great power, who, for its own reasons, wished to prevent Strigo from discovering the fate of those within the smaller vehicle. Of course, the relevant question is why! Were they to be sacrificed despite Strigo's apparent wish to save them? For I suspect he might have had some such unformed notion."

"Or," said Andrzej quietly, "were they to be rescued, even by this agency of whom we know nothing, for purposes at which we cannot even guess?"

"Exactly," replied Uribe. "At any rate, there is more to this than even Charn suspects. I believe we must continue to observe him, and Strigo. It may be hazardous for Strigo to remain with Charn, but by tracking Strigo we may unobtrusively keep watch over Charn as well. In this manner we may discover if the fledgling or her mortal consort survived Charn's handiwork, and what has become of them, and in so doing perhaps also gain some knowledge of a creature that uses magical fire as a shield and a disguise."

"I would scoff at this concern," remarked Mordaunt, a little querulously, "over this one fledgling, had I not strange tidings of my own. After all, young ones are made, and live a while, and die from exposure to sunlight or some other result of their own carelessness. We see them come and go, and we have never spent much time in concern for them. We have seen fledglings in a dozen cities in the West, but nothing unusual ever surfaced until this! What have we stumbled upon? It has turned Charn's weaknesses for the worse, and has involved Strigo, who is at best unpredictable. Who else will fall under the spell of madness in this city? Who is, or was, the mysterious Callina?"

"That, my dear Mordaunt," said Uribe, "is precisely what we must try to

discover. What are the strange tidings of which you speak? Have they relevance to this situation?"

"As to that," said Mordaunt, his dark eyes meeting Uribe's green gaze, "I know little, and surmise less, though there does appear to be a connection, however distant. You know that I have long collected works of art, and that chief among my favorites are the Impressionist painters, those so in love with light that they gave their lives in the attempt to capture its effects in paint. Perhaps you may recall that I own several fine works by de Reynardine, he who vanished after coming before the Council over eighty years ago, on charges of violating the law of secrecy."

Uribe's bushy blond brows shot up and he stared in surprise at Mordaunt.

"De Reynardine is it?" he said. "Odd it is, that you have mentioned him, for quite recently something else reminded me of him, and I read over the old records of his Council proceedings. Do you recall the excuses he offered for his behavior? It is rare, is it not, for one of the Blood to claim that voices in his dreams commanded him to rend the veil of secrecy that divided him from mortals? Rather more like a mortal suffering from delusions caused by disordered physiology. I have often thought it was a queer business, and all the more so because he vanished without a trace so soon afterwards. Yet I had no sense that he went into the sun, though I suppose he might have gone to earth."

"It's more peculiar than you guess," answered Mordaunt, "that you have brought him to mind just now. If you will recall further de Reynardine's manner before the Council, you may remember that he never admitted to making any fledglings, despite his assertions that he had told the truth about himself to at least one of his intimates. As no evidence was ever brought to light, it was long assumed that in fact, no fledglings came into being, no matter what de Reynardine said to anyone. But I have reason now to doubt the veracity of our old assumptions, because it would seem, unless I am as mad as was de Reynardine, that there was indeed a fledgling. Not only does she appear repeatedly in his best works of art, I myself have seen her. I saw and recognized her in St. Louis two years ago. And I have seen her again, within the past month, here in San Francisco."

Five

The journey on foot from the Marin headlands, across the bridge, and down through the city to Noe Valley was the longest, strangest trip of my life.

I stumbled after Calli's fleeing form, shocked out of anything remotely akin to ordinary consciousness, hearing Cat's silent voice calling me, compelling me to follow. I didn't know what drove her to go leaping and flying down the headland roads to the bridge, but I clung to the faraway chiming of that voice in my mind, because if I lost that I'd be at the mercy of my own perceptions. And right now they were a wilderness.

Did my feet move to carry me, or did I really fly? I couldn't tell, and it didn't matter. I thought about running, and I ran. I ran from Highway One at my back as though I'd escaped my own grave. I ran from the paralysis of that nightmare, chased some weird anticipatory excitement as it drew me down through the tangled canyons toward the Golden Gate Bridge. I trusted Cat to lead me, because I couldn't see straight. Only her voice that had pulled me through death and out the other side kept me from disintegrating as the darkness shifted and reformed; phantoms leered and beckoned to me from the shadows while the moon caught me in her net of light, and someone back up in the hills laughed high and far and full of mysterious delight...

Across the cold span of the bridge we blew, running so fast no mortal eye could see us. Down into the clamorous heart of the city we flew, while my mind

reeled in wonder and my body struggled to escape the mortal death passing through it. Sick, cold, burning with a fever that wasn't altogether physical, I listened to Cat's voice calling, and I ran, while my mind vomited visions, hallucinations, memories...

Old Leluvo, laughing at me...

Calli, the first time we'd made love...

Churning montages of faces I'd never seen before, torn fragmentary music, cries, echoes, synesthesia gone berserk in my brain...

Taste my death...smell the swarming masses of mortality around me...feel the air parting to let me pass...reach for Calli up ahead...

Only when we reached the comparative quiet of the steep hilly streets paralleling Castro south of Market did we slow our pace. I was anything but tired, but ultimate strangeness was overloading my senses, and I wanted more than anything else to go home, to stop running, to ask Calli a thousand questions.

But as I followed her, I concentrated--as much as I could--on that and nothing more, for nothing at all--neither the mortals whom we passed in our swift flight, whose blood-scent breathed heady perfume or stinking vileness, nor the wavering forms of fog-bound buildings, nor even the humped shapes of the hills--were recognizable to me.

This was still San Francisco--with part of my shredded sanity I knew that--but as if I'd taken a dose of acid, these known and loved streets had become a psychedelic wilderness.

I'd never been so glad to see the Queen Anne mansion standing in its sacred (if somewhat untended) grove, as I was tonight. The last night of my life, or the first, take your pick.

Ahead of me on the steep back stairs, Calli waited for me, seeming to shimmer with impatience as I lagged behind her. Feeling my responses slowing, I wondered if I could make it up the stairs before I fell asleep...or whatever might pass for sleep in this new life...if sleep was even what I wanted. I shivered, feeling as empty and cold as a reed in the wind, with the cold salt water on my face. Disoriented and still hardly able to see straight for the explosions of color in my eyes, I wasn't at all certain that I wasn't really dead.

I felt Calli's mind reach for mine then; felt the warmth of her thoughts enclosing mine.

"We're home," she whispered aloud. "This is our safe place."

Too confused to reply, I forced myself up the endless stairs to the door. A lifetime ago we'd danced out this door, Paul Leluvo and Callina...and nothing had been further from my thoughts, at least, than the word vampire.

But I did remember that I'd said some words about marriage, in those lost moments before the truck came roaring out of the fog.

"Yes, you did, my love," she said, holding out her hand to me. Her green eyes looked up into mine, full of trust and sorrow. "And now we are married, in a way no mortals could ever be."

That was our wedding--more like a baptism by fire, the sacrament of our shared blood spilled on the highway to feed whatever dark gods watched over us now.

For the first time, I sensed just how solitary Calli must have been until she joined Magical Merlin's Band, and, perhaps, how lonely she had been even thereafter, huddling this dark secret to her soul.

I'd already guessed without being told, that we were bound to secrecy.

I found my keys in my pocket--and stood there staring, enchanted, at the shiny, worn metal of the keys.

Look at the light...

A key...opening what? Do I belong here now? Am I a key?

Calli took the key ring from me and opened the back door to this Victorian house. Motivated by something I couldn't quite identify, bemused by my own extravagance, I'd purchased the place last year when the band began to make real money. I recalled how keenly concerned Calli had been, how interested, when I began house-hunting, though at that time she hadn't yet moved in with me. Now I

guessed she'd been mentally assessing all the real estate in terms of safety for herself or others of her--our--kind? She'd approved of this house, at any rate.

"It's almost secluded," she'd enthused, that first evening we spotted the shabby eighty-year-old house that stood vacant in a small, neglected, steeply sloping lot full of volunteer eucalyptus and nameless shrubs, in the hilly neighborhood south of Castro & 26th St.

"You'd have a lot more privacy here than in a row Victorian 'cause of all these bushes and trees on both sides of the house. That's rare in San Francisco! And nobody really would notice anyone's coming and going because of the entrance in the back, by the carriage house."

At the time, I'd taken her insistent concern about privacy and invisibility for granted. Maybe I figured it was only natural in a young and sensitive artist, lately come--as we all were--to considerable public visibility--who wanted some personal space unviolated by fans, managers, agents, or anyone else, including her band's other players. Now, I understood it more clearly. Calli was vigilant in the securing of her privacy. Though there might not be many who would truly believe in her kind here in the West--our kind, I thought again, shuddering with strange reaction--those who did come to believe might as easily convince themselves of our intrinsic evil as of our essential goodness. Maybe she--I--couldn't be too careful...

She slipped behind me and closed the door; dreaming, I'd let it stand open. I guessed I'd have to learn new lessons in safety now, wouldn't I? Although if anyone suspected that we were not quite what we seemed in the hot stage lights, would they be curious enough to come courting our attentions up those quietly lit steep stairs?

"Yeah," she said softly, as if she'd read my thoughts. "Like whoever tried to kill us. I thought I'd kept my secret well enough, but obviously I was wrong."

"Was it--do you have any idea whether it was a human being or--or one of--another one of--us?"

"No, not really," she said. I looked at her sharply.

Her voice told me plainly that she was hiding something from me. I guessed it'd been another vampire. But in that case, who had hauled us out of the fire? I let it pass for now. There were so many other things I needed to ask her...

Calli's little hand touched my arm as I stood drifting with my thoughts. Numbly I followed her as she glided through the comfortable and welcoming rooms where I lived, and on up the stairs to the tower room she'd made her own. It was a little aerie in the heavens, loftier than any other room in the neighborhood, and completely private among the trees.

And never had I climbed these steep stairs since the night Calli made this attic her home.

I remembered the window seat that followed the curve of the tower, the beveled transoms and the curved glass eyes of the tower beneath them, as I recalled the tall bookshelves a previous owner had installed, from my first exploration of the house last year. But there had been no books on the shelves then--now there were literally hundreds. Velvet cushions covered the window seat, and soft creamy carpeting had been laid down over the wooden floor, but there was no other furniture.

I wondered how she'd gotten all the books up here without my knowing it. I wondered something similar when I saw the rest of the attic.

Calli leaned out an open window, lifting her arms to the night sky as if in farewell, then turned back to me.

"We have to close the shades," she said seriously, "and pull the drapes closed over them. You shouldn't be touched by the first rays of the sun. When you're stronger, you'll be able to tolerate daylight, but now it would burn you, like the worst sunburn ever. And too much sun, like summer sun, could kill you, at least at first."

"But you can stand daylight, Calli--remember the Human Be-In a year ago in

January? We didn't stay long, but you were awake for that, and you weren't burned."

She nodded, smiling. "I had a lot of clothes on, though...I did burn a little...like a sunburn. But it was worth it to see the light... I made myself wake up, I thought I could handle a little pain, to see the light, and to be there when that was happening."

Another pleasant thought occurred to me.

"Do I--do you sleep in a coffin, Calli?" I said, shivering. I wanted very badly to stop it but I couldn't. My body was doing all sorts of things that I didn't understand, but I was fairly sure I wasn't about to climb of my own volition into a coffin meant for a dead body.

She laughed a little, and swiftly came to me where I stood in the middle of the tower room.

"No, I don't sleep in a coffin when I'm not sleeping with you," she said, and there was a silvery sweetness to her voice I'd never heard in it before. "I never have. The--the one who made me a vampire told me that I didn't have to, that I only needed a safe place where I could sleep protected from the first rays of the rising sun.

"You're truly a child of the night, now," she said, looking into my eyes. "We were made to celebrate this half of life, that's how I feel about it. The darkness is to most mortals the place of terror, but despite all the old tales and legends, we're not at the heart of their fears. Their own kind they fear infinitely more, and with infinitely better reason."

I saw a flicker of something--fear in memory--in her thoughts; then she felt me there, and swiftly closed her mind. She fell silent, and her green eyes were mortally sad.

"So you've been sleeping up here?" I finally asked. "I did wonder--sometimes--why you never stayed the night with me. But I've been such a loner myself for so long--I figured you just preferred to sleep alone after..."

She shook her head. Candlelight glinting off her hair left 4th-of-July-sparkler trails in my vision.

"I never wanted my solitude then--especially not then," she said sadly. "But if I'd stayed, I'd have given myself away when I slept so soundly you wouldn't have been able to wake me, and then you'd have really started to wonder, wouldn't you?"

Some fragment of my old sense of humor asserted itself. "You know what I'd have done, I think."

She laughed for the first time in hours. So did I.

She pushed at me playfully, pointing me towards the long, low attic room that shared with the tower this top floor of my house.

"While I slept? Defenseless as I was, you'd have ravished me regardless?"

"Hmm, well, I guess not," I thought out loud, following her, "I would have wondered how you could sleep through my attentions, it's true..."

She laughed again, and I could almost see the rippling sound in the darkness. "So you say, but you wouldn't have liked it much--if you felt I wasn't *there* with you."

That was true enough. And Calli knew that was the real reason I'd finally decided not to involve myself, even casually, with the groupies who pursued me when I was playing on the road. Long before I knew Calli, I discovered that I was just as attractive to women as they were to me but that most sexual encounters, no matter how intense, lacked some connection, some communion I couldn't even define. *Sensation of a phantom consciousness,* I thought, and had no better explanation. I learned, unhappily, that such encounters would leave me lonelier still, and still wanting, so I let them be, and was something of an oddity in these freewheeling sexual times. Women told me they figured I was carrying a torch for someone else, maybe someone with a secret? As it turned out, I proved them right, later on, after Calli found me in San Francisco...

Something asleep inside me came awake when she stood before me backstage and told me her name and her vocation. Under the sea-green spell of her gaze, I

invited her to bring her songs to our rehearsal.

She was small. The Framus twelve-string wasn't, but she played it with authority. Her sense of rhythm was unusual--where had she learned to play--and compose--in five-four time?

Her head lifted, her eyes swept our faces. She sang.

We listened. Then we played, improvised softly around her wandering melody.

It was a lot like four musicians falling in love--no, like making love.

Her eyes glowed. She didn't really smile, but her face did. She looked over at me and I broke out in a sweat, though I wasn't playing hard, and the studio was cool.

And I'm twenty-seven years old and it's not a great idea to get mixed up with a woman you want to work with...

Oh, God, her voice, I know it from somewhere, isn't this a voice I hear singing in my dreams? And the golden fields, the green water in her eyes...

Is she a witch? Is she something or someone Old Leluvo would have recognized?

Callina. Mystery, determined like nothing I've ever seen to stay mysterious. It's not a pose, not a game. Too damned deadly serious for play. She might be mad. Or...she might not be.

Mark and Mickey and I traded astonished stares while we played. *This is pure chemistry,* I thought, *the fourth dimension of Magical Merlin's music, the key to our potential.*

Calli belonged with us.

I knew right away that she was very interested in me. She wasn't shy about that, though she was extremely secretive about everything else except music.

Asking her finally to come home with me, I felt like I was walking off the high dive.

It's a long way down to the water...

I don't know, now, what I expected. I only know that the desire I felt for her was a powerful thing, that I felt driven by it, as if someone inside me was hurtling towards a mating with someone long-awaited and intimately known.

But whatever I expected, I wasn't ready for it, the night Calli came home with me.

Some things you just don't believe. Or you do--you must--but you lack words to frame the thing you most want to express. You're more than haunted, but something mutes it and silences you... Ask no questions, learn no lies...

The truth just might be scary.

"Calli, aren't you cold? Come on and get under the sleeping bag..."

It's midnight. Clad in some impossibly fragile scrap of silk, she's leaning out the open window like it's high summer somewhere that isn't San Francisco. I hear her murmur, "I'll warm up..." as the cold wind ruffles her hair.

Yes. She heats up like amber in my arms. Quietly electric, the feel of her up against me. And yes again.

All through this dreamlike long night, exploring distant reaches of desire with her, I watch the moonlight catch and flicker on her cheekbones, in her eyes...not till dawn, when I awake to find no trace of her in my bed, nothing but the lavender scent of her and the sense of her in my mind, do I remember that there was no moon last night.

I don't know why I asked no searching questions of her. Maybe she didn't want me to. I guess I thought if she wanted to tell me something, she would. Strangely--or maybe not--neither Mark nor Mickey asked difficult questions either, at least, not where I could hear them. The intensely personal communion that had begun growing between the four of us silenced such concerns, and soon we didn't care nearly as much about where Calli had come from as we did where she might go.

Mick was troubled most by Calli's strangeness, but he never hid his uneasiness from her, and she was always gentler with him than with Mark or me.

Mark--well, Mark was like me, willing to dance with mysteries.

Calli hardly believed me when I told her that I loved her and wanted her to live with me. For a time she drew away from me, vanishing after rehearsals before I could catch up to her. There was nothing I could do but wait for her to come back. I had no idea where she lived. I wondered briefly if she was involved with another man, but she only laughed, though gently, when I asked. She evaded all such questions.

But finally I won, and she consented to *live in my house*.

Those were her words, and at first I didn't understand why she chose them. Later on, I did, though I never guessed the reasons.

"Listen, Paul," she'd said, the first night after she'd brought her few belongings over. "I have to tell you this now, and give you the chance to--to change your mind, before I...I can't live with you like a--an ordinary person. I sleep during the day. You'll never see me awake much before dusk, and I won't wake up if you try to awaken me. Also, I need to sleep alone...I know, that sounds funny, Paul...I can't explain any better than that. I love you...you can't even guess...but some things I can't change."

She'd looked so miserable that I'd hastened to reassure her that she could have any room in the house for her own, to do whatever she wanted with, and that I'd never step foot in it unless she invited me to.

I kept my promise; I never climbed up to the tower. It was enough for me to know that she was there. My guardian angel, I called her, and never knew the truth behind my words.

Magical Merlin's Band ignored the occasional strange stories and rumors that circulated about Calli--how she could walk into a room so silently nobody would know she was there, how her skin had a luminous glow sometimes as if it reacted differently to light than everybody else's, the uncanny way she seemed to know unspoken thoughts. If Calli heard the rumors--and I'm sure she did--she made no reference to them.

Whatever people thought of her, they loved her music.

And though she continued to keep very much to herself, did not spend whole nights with me even after she moved in with me, and was rarely to be seen before sunset, I never had any reason to doubt my trust in her, nor her joy in me.

"Are you woolgathering, love?" said Calli to me.

Strange, rising up through memories...reaching into the shadows for recollections more distant, tantalizing...to this wild consciousness.

Yes, I trusted her with my life.

She took it, though it wasn't worth much by that time...

And she gave me back--this...

She guided me in the deeper blackness of the attic room, to where I felt a low bed piled with soft furs and blankets.

"Be still a moment, Paul."

I heard the striking of a match, the prosaic sound almost shocking in the thick soft darkness.

Then the light of a candle flared, blinding me. The world around me disintegrated into splintered shards of diamond light. I closed my eyes in a wave of dizziness, reached shakily for the edge of the bed and sank down on it.

Quiet, quiet for just a moment. Why do I keep feeling as if I've just been running, or just come out of deep waters? She too was utterly still as if waiting for me.

Carefully, I opened my eyes. Vampire sight is different, to put it mildly. I'd already figured that out on the way back here. Imagine looking through the eyes of the dragonfly...I was going to have to learn how to switch this off or I'd be transfixed, staring...

"Calli, you should've warned me it would be like dropping a hit of some psychedelic!"

"And spoil your fun?" she said, sounding a little amused. "Don't worry, it doesn't stay that way, at least it didn't with me."

It was a few moments before I could focus enough to realize that I was seeing candlelight, incredibly brilliant and lovely, reflecting in a hundred crystals hanging everywhere in the room, and this comprehension made me snort with irreverent joyful laughter. Calli's still a hippie, and she believes a hippie's got to have some crystals hanging up to catch the light--even if it'll always be either candlelight or moonlight.

I heard her soft assenting chuckle, and my splintered vision assembled itself into vibrant clarity as I gazed at the room revealed by the candlelight. I'd looked at this attic room as well as the tower, when I first came to see the house, naturally, but I hadn't come up here after Calli moved in. I'd had no idea that Calli had made herself a luxurious, even opulent little hideaway.

"I used to love the sunlight," she said softly, moving around the perimeter of the room with noiseless grace. "It was awful, having to accept the fact that sunlight could no longer be a constant part of my life, so I've always surrounded myself with candlelight during my nighttimes at home. The night is beautiful too...I don't miss the sun quite as much now that I'm here, in this safe place you've given me."

She had turned the attic chamber into a room where a Victorian traveler and collector would have felt at home. The juxtaposition of fabric patterns and colors and the clustered objects on tables and shelves--pictures, photographs (I saw myself in one), round lacquerware and wooden boxes, fans of lace and ivory delicately carved as lace, polished stones, candlesticks, brass bowls, books and more books--caught and entranced the eye and invited the other senses in.

She'd made the Victorian bed's curtains of Battenberg lace--gods know where she'd found that rare and beautiful stuff. Everywhere I looked, on the bed where I lay, on chairs and little Queen Anne tables, and piled in baskets on the floor, lace and fringed shawls, Scottish paisleys, and the rich tribal reds and blues of Turkish carpet all shone with kaleidoscopic brilliance in my eyes.

I felt myself relaxing as I gazed around in wonder. Painful pleasure, equally a sensation of homecoming--this was my home, a part of it I'd never seen until this night. And nobody else had ever seen it at all. It was a haven, all right--a secret place known to no others but ourselves.

And with what secret part of my mind had I dimly known, (as I'd known of the mostly harmless haunters of the old Victorian homes I loved) that this was so, that a secret life existed within my attic rooms? How had I known in my heart that I'd never, never come up here uninvited during the day? Had I already known, guessed, what I would find?

A wild, lost part of my mind whispered, *Step into my parlor, said the Vampire to the*...and I found myself laughing quite helplessly, realizing what the end of the sentence would have to be. I laughed so hard I frightened myself, but I couldn't stop. When I tried to stifle the dangerous laughter I succeeded only in weeping, without conscious volition and with none of the inhibition I'd have felt as a mortal man. Laughter and tears seemed to come naturally to this immortal being, and in my weakened condition I had no defense against them, nor any emotional reaction.

I have become a reed in the cold wind, I thought again, *for voices that blow through me as I lie here falling towards another unknown journey, and a sleep that will resemble no rest I've ever known.* And these tears, that I touch with my fingers, look like red mercury, mercury and blood, in the rich yellow light.

But the night was not yet turned towards morning. And these are the wakeful hours. Vampire's hours.

Calli shrugged off the torn and scorched green velvet dress she'd donned an eternity ago, for the concert and celebratory aftermath that had ended so strangely. Only it hadn't ended yet, had it?

She pushed at me until I moved over to make room for her on the bed, and she gently laid herself down beside me.

Hesitantly I turned to touch her, needing to hold her. She came swiftly, wide-eyed, into my arms.

Oh, yes, it felt different, even to hold her. But then love between mortals is not an easy thing to describe, so how can I begin to explain the melding of mind and body between immortals? It'd be easier with music...

All the old emotions I felt, yes, and new and unfamiliar emotions besides. Calli was my lover, as she had been for a year. But now, her mystery had become mine, and in this new existence, Calli was my...I didn't know what to call her. My maker? But for her, I'd be dead now, a dead thing in a morgue locker, a thing to give my band members nightmares. *And just what do you think you are now?* my mind whispered, but I let that be--I had no answer. What the hell is a vampire? Never mind the movies and the books, this is my life now. Or should I say, *unlife?*

All these thoughts and feelings were submerged in the conviction that my heart and mind were completely open to Calli. I'd imagined they were, at times, but now I knew it was so. And we were more together than we had ever been before, for she had always been able to read my thoughts and feelings, but until tonight, despite my occasionally scary prescience, I'd mostly been reaching in the dark for her.

She stretched luxuriously, a cat's easy rippling movement, and shivered a little.

"Are you--are you hungry? Or do you call it thirst?" I asked, not certain I was ready yet to be initiated into Calli's methods of procuring nourishment.

"Call it whatever it names itself to you," she remarked gently. "It is the desire beyond all mortal desire, and it's different for each of us. I'll need to drink sometime soon, but it's more important that you drink from me now. You shouldn't wait; you were very badly hurt when I changed you, and you need the blood. You don't seem quite ready...at least, you don't act like it...to go out and satisfy your needs...so you will have to drink from me again."

"Go out--you mean, go and hunt somebody?"

"Well...yes. That's how you usually do it. I mean...there aren't any fast-food restaurants that could serve us..."

"Very funny, love. But, hey, maybe there's a fortune to be made here, if we decide it's too risky being musicians."

"What did you have in mind, Paul, a drive-up blood bank?"

Whatever we were, we evidently hadn't lost our purely mortal silliness in the process.

I rubbed my face, wondering if I was tired, or what it was I felt. My mind was moving so fast I couldn't keep up with it. I hadn't considered the sustenance part of my transformation until now.

"Ah...look, my dear. You're right--I'm hardly about to go down onto Mission Street and entice some young thing into the nearest alley. Is that the only way there is? And...good grief, Calli, you don't kill them, do you?"

Again I caught a glimpse of something nightmarish in her thoughts; three or four figures struggling, bathed in ugly pink street light; strange flickering like pale fire beyond them. But once again I felt her slam down a wall around this image to hide it from me.

"What are you hiding from me, Calli? It's strange, but now I can really feel your thoughts. I can see them...like a movie. What was so horrible that you can't let me see it? I should think after tonight I've seen my share of bad dreams come true."

She sighed; a mortal sound from immortal lungs and lips. "It's true...I'm just accustomed to shutting off those memories. I couldn't stand to remember...how I died...for a long time. And nobody's ever seen...what you just saw...except my maker. He was...he heard me...and he came to find me, but he was almost too late."

Her body shuddered in my arms. Once more I realized how secretive she'd had to be--even as she fell in love with me. Well, I wouldn't force her to share her nightmares with me; if she ever wanted to, she'd show me whatever it was.

She seemed to realize she hadn't answered my most important question then. her eyes were pools of shadow, untouched by the candlelight.

"No, you don't have to ever kill, at least, I don't; I can't. I mean, I'm capable of it, and so are you. And when the hunger--or thirst, whatever you want to call it--strikes you, you might want to kill... But I...my maker taught me another way. I...well, I seduce them. I guess that's the most honest way to put it."

"You...take them to bed, Calli? That's a...that's more intimacy than I...I guess I should've cultivated all those groupies I've been avoiding for years!"

Her low laughter seemed to wrap itself around my ears, as if it were the sound of the flickering candlelight.

"I never thought I'd hear that from you...but really, I don't think you'll have any problem, just because people...everybody wants to know you, get close to you, Paul! But...no, you need not literally take them to bed, if you don't want to, though...it makes it simpler that way. Mortals...it's easy to dominate most of them with kindness..."

That was all too clear; she didn't have to finish the sentence. I wondered if that was how she'd made her way into my life? No, that was unjust and small-minded. Still...ooh, God, so that's how she'd survived for the last...however long it had been. It occurred to me that I didn't even know--really--how old Calli was. But if she said this was the only way, I guessed I'd have to learn, distasteful as the idea seemed right now. Maybe, I reasoned, it wouldn't seem like that at all, once the thirst got hold of me.

"I think you're missing part of what I'm trying to tell you," she said then. "You don't just barge in and...whatever. You have great mental powers now, Paul--you don't even suspect yet what you can probably do. All you have to do is look at them, look into their eyes, and think loving and desiring thoughts, and they'll be yours. It's not like a rape, my love, even if they don't precisely give you permission... Invariably they'll want to see you again. It may not be the perfect solution, but you'd like the alternative even less."

She was probably right, but I had to ask, anyway. "What's the alternative?"

The garnet-green eyes blazed with unnamable emotion as she looked at me. "You can terrorize them into submission. My...my maker told me that some of the others kill their victims by breaking their necks, if the taking of the blood alone doesn't kill them. And they delight most in the terror they bring; they savor the taste of it in the blood."

"Ugh. I'm sorry I asked. I guess...I've got no choice, do I? I'll have to learn how to do it the way you do; it sounds as close to humane as--as a vampire can be, I guess. Will you teach me?"

"I will...or maybe my maker would help you. It's really not horrible, Paul, I'm sorry if it sounds that way. When I touch them...I love them. I never hurt anyone...either they don't remember anything, or they remember the sensual part of it...you just have to find people who attract you, then it isn't so hard."

"Whom do you go after, then?" I asked curiously.

She tried to close her thoughts from me, but I saw in her mind a memory of a young man, long brown hair and hazel eyes...somebody, in fact, who looked a lot like me.

"That's true," she said in a tiny voice. "It's easier that way...I can pretend they're all you...and then it's easy to tell them without words that I love them..."

I didn't have any answer for her. This was going to take some serious thought. And I wondered how long I'd have before I was forced to do--something.

She wound her arms around me, and I gratefully buried my face in her wild hair. How could I ever pretend that some strange human being was my Calli? There were no others like her.

"You need to drink from me," she said, her voice soft. "My blood will help strengthen you, and you will not need to hunt so soon."

"That'll exhaust you, Calli, won't it? You've already shared with me once tonight..."

"I can gain strength from you without taking your blood, while you take the blood from me, as long as you..."

She hesitated as if afraid, but what could she fear from me?

Then she went on. "...If you feel the physical desire you felt for me when you were a mortal..."

"Ah...do we...can I still?"

The black humor of this moment didn't escape me, but Calli wasn't laughing. Her thoughts veiled themselves from me.

"I knew one of us who could," she said in a whisper.

"But...what you mean is...it's not the usual thing, is it?"

I saw the truth then, that she couldn't disguise from me. Her maker had indeed told her that males of the Blood generally had no interest in nor ability to express mortal sexuality. Mortal blood, the violent intimacy of thirst fulfilled, took its place.

But she'd known one who could? I wondered briefly who he was, the vampire who'd been able to make love with her as a mortal would.

I lay there in the flickering candlelight, holding her and trying to understand all of this. I didn't blame her for not telling me everything right at first. There hadn't been time, and it wasn't as if I'd had much choice. Die or be undead--that was about it. And precious little time to make the biggest decision I'd ever made.

Okay...if I drank from her again, which apparently was necessary, I was going to exhaust her--and she looked pretty damned beat already, my poor little darling...but just maybe it wouldn't be a problem. I've loved her since the first night she came home with me, if not long before that. Just because I'd traded some of my blood for hers shouldn't turn me into a creature incapable of physical love--no, I just wasn't about to believe that.

I murmured in her ear, putting all my conviction into the words.

"The day you can't make me want you, want to take you in love and passion and pure mortal lust--well, that'll be the day I really die. Or the night, Calli..."

Tears and shaky laughter. She was really scared, scared I'd fly into a rage when the truth came out, scared that I wouldn't be able...

But she'd known one of the Blood who could love her like a mortal man? Some pride in me I'd always denied rose up at that, and declared itself no less a lover...

Drowning in sensation, I kissed her, inhaling the smoky fragrance of her blood. Without words she told me that another vampire's blood is the richest of any, most heavily laden with psychic electricity, the very elixir of youth. All I'd known in that paralyzed moment out in the woods was that her blood tasted of her, intoxicating as some dark wine out of midnight pressings, all subtle fire and smoky aftertaste.

And though I'd imagined I knew her body as well as I knew my own, there was something ineffable, some dawning sense of strangeness and wonder in that kiss that silenced me, halted the turmoil of my wildly awakened vampire consciousness. I was utterly silenced with strangeness and humility.

I understood now that in the year and more I'd loved Calli, I'd never truly known her. As she lay beside me clothed only in a perfection of nacreous flesh that whispered, not of death, but of pearls and mermaids and some elder magic, to my senses, I knew I had never come close to understanding her. Neither the true depth and intensity of her love for me, nor the nature of her one great secret had I guessed.

I buried my face in her tangled hair, trying to find a path to myself, to her, to us. *OK, she's a vampire. So am I. She still needs and responds to mortal sexuality. I know that, I knew that already from this last year. She wants me still in that way, but she's scared I won't or can't. Well...it's not just her blood I need, it's Calli herself I need. Even my blundering mortal self knew that much, and gave her everything I could give in return. That Paul didn't die in the*

change. Because...I still want to make love with her, just like always. And changed or not, I think I can.

I held her and was still; the rapport between us a visible electricity. Now nothing at all would be hidden between us, unless Calli still tried to shield her thoughts from me...

She trembled in my arms as she felt me trying to find my way through the sensory overload of my emotions and hers. Finally her chaotic thoughts quieted, and her body with it, and we once more could feel the comfort of our bodies together.

And in no way would this ever resemble mortal lovemaking.

Her stillness, the passion I read in that very inhuman quiet, made me shiver, and dizziness threatened to overcome me once again.

"Pretend you're still just Paul," she whispered out loud, and the familiar humor in her voice anchored my overloaded perceptions in the moment. Holding her, held fast by her, I slowly gained some measure of self-control.

I read in Calli's thoughts poignant images of my mortal self, the lover I had been.

But this is like being a virgin all over again!

Your body remembers what to do. Let go.

The humor and the craziness of it infected us, and we started laughing, a new fierceness in our kisses. Her teeth on mine sent chills through me, the vampiric pleasure that set me shivering.

Mortals' sensual fires are hot; ours are more like cool deep water that invades our bodies and every place in us, freeing the spirit in joyful flight, in effortless physical joy and healing rapport. I laughed again at the thought that we were, after all, like any lovers joining for the first time.

Oh, yes, this was the first time, make no error in that. My memories of mortal sexuality blew away in the wind as I stared at Calli, so strange, so known, and she stared back at me.

Vampire to vampire we stared, filled with the vast yearning which for mortals at least is never assuaged...but we were no longer mortal.

And the night enfolded us, night's true celebrants and disciples, as immortal bodies joined with immortal souls. On the far shore of death, love is reaffirmed...

Now I could feel Calli in a way I'd hardly dreamed was possible; could feel the electricity of her emotions as they flooded into mine; could share the visions that filled her mind as we moved together. Her hands made my changing flesh shudder uncontrollably. Touching her in all the old ways, rediscovering her cool fragility that was not really fragile, that could match and surpass any passion and inventiveness in me, it was discovery and renewed delight at once. And homecoming it was, to bury my face in the coolness of her that warmed under my mouth and hands. She was the Calli I'd always known; it was I who'd changed. And if I'd thought I loved her before, now I felt as if all that had only been rehearsal.

When we finally fitted our bodies together, I was the one who cried out in amazement and shock. Could even immortal flesh bear it, these sensations of melting into another's body and mind?

When humans make love, it is in a frenzy of movement, towards an inevitable denouement that can barely be controlled. With us it is different. I discovered that our bodies experienced their pleasure even in complete stillness; in fact, this seemed to heighten my awareness of her and of myself. But finally, when even this stillness had become unbearable, when we'd felt this strange fine vampire passion building to a blaze of mingled pleasure and totally shared awareness, she freed her hands to push her hair away from the ivory flesh of her neck. She whispered to me, and I wasn't sure at all whether my ears heard her, or my soul which had learned to listen.

"Please...drink, now, Paul. All that I am, all that I can give, I offer to

you, in return for the mortal life you gave me, for the immortal life you give me now..."

Her words made the cold exquisite fire in me blaze still higher, and it was pleasure akin to agony to take her slim strong shoulders in my hands and drive my new-grown feline fangs into the tender flesh she offered. My mind said, *Paul, you really are a vampire now... Yes, yes,* I agreed, *doesn't this seem like the right thing to do, the most loving and ecstatic thing in the world?*

Burgundy blood glittered in the candlelight as I fastened upon the tiny pierced marks; her life thundered into me, roaring in my head like Mickey's bass. Impaled upon me, pierced to the quick and to the blood by me, she tore down all the walls between us and flung herself into my consciousness...

And both of us screamed aloud as her memory ripped wide--to reveal everything she'd tried to hide from me...

...running in terror
falling/no escape from them now/
water reflecting street lights/
silver knives and cruel smiles/then
pain and more pain and more
trying to run from her attackers again
but they always trip and catch her
and do what they want, just as
?Richard? always did,
until the darkness began to claim her
and then the madness as another's inexorable will
made her stand on her feet though she was close to death
and then that same will drove those silver knives into
their bodies as they screamed and tried to run
and she wanted to run away but she could not,
and then she turned in her bloody tracks to see him,
the dark god, her savior, the other one, who had
made her kill, who had saved her life...

This was her story, in images much too swift for words, but she knew I could see it, helpless to not see it, in fact, had felt all her terror and madness, relived with her the cataclysm of death that is every vampire's birth-memory.

And if this violent vision was not already shocking in itself, there was this: out of that ultimate-nightmare memory of the night when two men had abducted her, raped her, stabbed her until the moment when the god had entered her body and soul to strike them down--out of this dreadful vision came the image of the dark god himself, who had watched, unseen, from nearby, called by the bond of love and blood he shared with her. He would become her maker, the vampire who saved her from imminent death.

And the sight of him started something squirming in my memory... Old Leluvo's face...a cold night in St. Louis...what had happened that night, after the gig at the Fox Theatre, itself an unreal place, a venue of shadows? Something to do with a music club in a smoky cellar...and his face, Rene's face--Rene du Baisser, Rene of the Shadows...and Calli.

That her mental and physical screams had attracted attention was not in itself surprising, even in a city. Though most bystanders are loath to step into such a situation, there are those who will. The vampire in his long tweed coat and lace-frothed shirt felt no fear as he sent his quiet knowledge and his great power into Calli's body and soul to help her defeat the rapists. His cold inexorable power came into her limbs and her eyes.

As she raised herself from the ground where her blood had been spilled, she felt his presence like the visitation of a vengeful god, filling her torn and anguished body. If she had not been close to death, she might have recognized that presence before she saw him.

But she was so near to unconsciousness that only his will kept her in her body, turning in slow agony, to the shadowy doorway where *he* was, the source, the fountain, her savior.

He came quietly, gracefully, out into the ugly light of the parking lot where they'd dragged her. He stood silently in the glare of the pinkish lights so that she could see him. As if his presence was another knife or another cruel hand laid upon her youth, she screamed out loud again in a voice all but lost from screaming--and then stopped in confusion. He had saved her, hadn't he? And--no matter what he was--and it was obvious now that he was not human--she knew him.

He had been her first--her only--lover.

And my memory of that night in St. Louis came suddenly, eerily clear. Rene du Baisser. Rene of the Shadows. And Calli, singing alone, a ragged gamine--mortal still? No. Calli, reaching out to me, arousing the mystery Old Leluvo had warned of, the strangeness in my mind, or in my blood, the ancient psychic awareness that now possessed me, rode my consciousness like a drug...and had she planted the seeds of recognition and desire, so that when we met again, I'd feel her, know her...invite her into my life? And hadn't she then made me somehow forget?

Yes, of course.

And Rene...Rene had brought me to her.

Rene...well-known, the hot saxophonist with whom many were acquainted but with whom nobody was truly intimate; respected by his jazz mates and perennially pursued by women, who admired his skin that glowed like polished mahogany and his dark almond-shaped eyes: that was the facade Rene du Baisser presented to the mortal world.

But though neither he nor Calli had been mortal by the time I met them, I'd played with him for two weeks and never guessed what great secret lay behind his reserve, never imagined that anything occult lay behind his odd invitation for me to accompany him to that little folk club...

"Rene!" I said in a whisper. "I was gigging with him when I first met you in St. Louis!"

"Yes, I know," she said, a little sadly, as if she feared my anger. "He wanted us to meet. I loved him--I love him still--but Rene lives alone. He said I needed to live out my life as I would have if I--if I'd stayed mortal... I'd come to see the Shadows that night, because he told me to. He said to pay attention to you, listen to your spirit in the music. I almost approached you after the gig, but I was afraid...I knew already you didn't take them seriously, the girls who hung around backstage...I didn't want you to think I was one of them. So he said he'd bring you to hear me sing...and I was already...you were beautiful..."

"And then," I said, looking into her eyes full of shattered light, "you made me forget all about it, didn't you?"

"Are you angry at me because I did?" she asked.

Wordlessly I shook my head. This wasn't a thing to be angry over...it was something that needed to be assimilated, understood...

I'd been had, like a captured creature. Had I ever really understood this before? What was it in me that had made it so easy for them, those two vampires, to surround me, make me a prisoner of my own desires? For I had wanted Calli when I saw her...

Rene must have read me a lot better than I read him. And there was absolutely no point in going over that ancient ground now. My life had taken a stranger-than-fiction direction that night--and against all the odds, here I was now. With Calli...really with her.

Angry? No. Because, no matter how she'd done it, tricked me or hypnotized me

or just plain seduced me, mind and body and soul...there wasn't any place I'd rather be.

Somewhere in my mind I could hear Old Leluvo, laughing...

She kissed me on my mouth, licking the bit of blood from my lower lip. Then I felt her teeth on my throat, and the brief stinging pain as she took back a token of the wealth she'd given me.

At that, my mortal passion rose to meet her, as her blood burned its way into my brain. Cold vampires became too hot to touch as we rediscovered the joyful sexuality we'd shared this past year.

And then suddenly the great wave had us: lightning shook our bodies like autumn's dry leaves, and like the storm winds our two voices cried out into the velvet darkness and the crystalline light. *Together, together, never to walk alone of soul again...*

Finally our thoughts spiraled away into calmer waters; I felt her mind gently disengage from mine, leaving a strange quiet space behind her. Like any mortal lovers, we held each other for awhile, both of us shuddering with the echoes of that passionate experience.

"Little death, indeed," she whispered in a voice reedy with exhaustion.

Stroking her face, her hair, I noticed the small marks of my teeth were already disappearing. It reminded me of all the questions I still needed to ask her. But even as I thought to frame my wonder in words, she shook her head.

"The sun is on its way," she said. "Soon I'm going to sleep and you won't be able to wake me. But hold on to me until you fall asleep, and don't be scared of your dreams. Your mind has survived a great change, but it might talk in tongues for awhile! When we wake up, though, tonight, you'll feel different than you do now."

"Less like I accidentally ingested something in Albert Hoffmann's laboratory?" I asked.

She snorted with laughter. "Your mental abilities must be different than mine; are you still tripping out?"

"Well, it gives a whole new meaning to the words "grateful dead," I answered, feeling goofy.

We both guffawed at that. Musicians of our time we were, regardless of our immortality!

Suddenly she stiffened, as if she'd heard a sound from somewhere in the house.

"Shhh," she said softly. "Did you hear it? Somebody's looking for us. They're just outside the house."

"Human or vampire?"

"Vampire."

She sat up in the tumbled bedclothes, listening, then slid from the bed and moved silently into the tower. Pulling the heavy draperies aside the barest fraction, she put her eye to the opening. I felt a thread of cold night air slipping into the round room. Calli's shoulders tensed, and I heard her speak--or was it Cat's voice, shrill and hissing and barely understandable?

"Who are you? Are you the one who tried to kill us?"

The voice that answered was hardly audible; I heard it as much with my mind as my ears.

"No, I am not he whom you fear."

"Then what brings you here so soon before dawn? Why aren't you taking shelter from the sun, if you're of our kind?"

"The same reason that finds you awake enough to hear me, fledgling. Need--and awareness of danger."

Calli leaned a little further out the tower window. I wanted to grab her, tell her not to expose herself to the unknown one who had called her, but I didn't touch her, just listened. My mind was doing unfamiliar things. Information about

the strange vampire was falling into my awareness in a wholly unfamiliar way. He closed his mind to me when he felt me reaching out in my unpracticed way; nonetheless, I got an image of him, a darkness that was somehow welcoming rather than ominous, laughter in his shielded mind, and the overwhelming understanding that he was one dedicated to truth.

"He's telling the truth," I said softly to Calli. I didn't know if she heard me.

"Who's trying to kill us?" she asked him.

"One from overseas. He calls himself Charn, and has political aspirations. Were he human, you'd name him vigilante, for he has ever stood apart from the more reasonable of his peers, even while earning their respect and the authority that accompanies it. Now his ambitions have turned his head, and he acts alone, though not without aid."

"What have you to do with him?"

"Nothing. I am a watcher from outside. You will know me someday, perhaps."

I felt as much as heard faint mocking laughter; then even that sense of him was no more.

"He's vanished," said Calli, closing the draperies and turning slowly to face me. "I've never seen anyone move that fast, not even Rene. I wonder who he really is. The watcher! What do you suppose he means?"

"I don't know, but he's told us the name of the killer, anyway."

"How can I believe him, though?"

"I heard truth in his voice. And I caught a glimpse of him...not his physical appearance, just a sense of darkness, and laughter...but almost affectionate. He wasn't hiding because he has something to hide from us, not exactly. I don't know! My mind...Calli, you didn't tell me it was going to...go wild like this."

"Like how, go wild? Are you still seeing things?"

"No...not as much. Except that light still just about blinds me...it's voices, and thoughts, and--like when I drank from you, as we loved--I couldn't stop your memories. It was horrible, Calli! Do all--all our kind have this mental ability? If I don't learn how to control it, or turn it off, it'll drive me bats. Pardon the pun."

She stood, gnawing her lip in a purely mortal manner, then shook herself all over. "Rene might be able to teach you to use the power you have; he's stronger in that way than I am. No, we don't all have that ability--I certainly don't! I'm sorry you saw my nightmares--I tried to hide them from you... Did you pick up anything just now, though, about the watcher, like his name?"

"No, as soon as he felt me trying to reach him, he, like, shielded his mind or something. I couldn't tell a thing after that."

"Too bad...," she sighed. "Well...morning is coming soon. I can't feel any danger outside now, so let's go back to bed. Tonight we'll have the band to deal with, assuming that Mark or Mordie or--heaven forbid, the police--don't find their way up here during the day."

"D'you think they will?"

"I don't know, my love. If they did, I'd wake up, very unwillingly. You might not wake up at all."

"After a night like this," I said, "I wouldn't wake up either, even if I were still human!"

"Come on, then," she said, and led me back into the attic room.

I was only too happy to comply, and I crept back into our warm nest as outside the sky began to lighten.

"And now I'll have no more secrets from you," she murmured. Her eyes were dreamy and distant. Looking at her, I began to feel so myself. The lights flickered and dimmed--I realized Calli was snuffing them out, smiling to herself.

Then she was in my arms once more as if she'd never moved.

"Paul Leluvo," she whispered, "now you can really play the music of time."

And she slept on the faint breath of her words in the air. So I held her, eyes closed, soul closed in the soft darkness of the attic haven. Sweetness stealing

over me now, the moment between awake and asleep. I see Rene's gleaming face for an instant somewhere--he smiles--Calli is dreaming and I am so close that I dream with her. Body quiet and almost my own again, thoughts banked and still, but there is this one pinpoint spark of awareness. Sliding into the green water, that awareness is all joy.

So dreaming, tangled up in Calli's arms where I've been many a night before, I slipped out of the green lovely dream and on into time. The things I saw, the things I learned, while my body slept with Calli's and was changed into something altogether new--I can't yet describe any of this in words.

I guess Calli's going to have to teach me those, too.

******

[This is the first part to a novel of approximately 300 pages in length, recently serialized on Bitnet. For those of you who can't wait for the next issue of GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS to find out what happens next, you may contact the author at 803 S. Cottage Grove, Urbana, IL 61801; she is currently in the process of issuing the entire novel in a hardcover, collectors limited edition with color illustrations.]

NIGHTWINGS

I spun away
From you, hair falling
Silver in that white
Moonlight.
"You're my night wings,"
You said, following me,
Catching me,
Silent.
I laughed.
Always you had
The phrase to hold me.
Your eyes
So dark in that
Light, bottomless, eternal.
I knew
Then I was caught
For always, for you.
"You're
My life!" you
Whispered, pleaded, arms
Reaching around me.
Your
Lips on mine:
I kissed your smooth
Throat, warm, moving with
Hunger.
"No, love,
You're mine," I
Said through sharp teeth.
Wrapping
You in my
Night wings, once more.

-Heidi Staneslow

NIGHT CALL

by

Jack L. Summers

[Editor's Note: All of us met April in GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 1. Several of you asked how she became a vampire. This tale tells that story.]

April Marsh shivered against the frigid night air and pulled the flimsy shawl tighter over her thin cotton night gown. The slivers of moonlight that peeked from between scurrying gray clouds cast an eerie light over the weed-choked path leading across the yard to the run. The rushing stream that carved the run was so small it had no name. The miniature gash in the Appalachian hills didn't either.

The brisk night wind was cold, but that was not the only reason April shivered. She was afraid and she was not sure why. She was afraid to sleep, afraid to stay awake, afraid of tomorrow, afraid of her next birthday! Tonight was the thirty-first of March. Tomorrow, she would be sixteen years old. In these lonely West Virginia mountains, sixteen years made her a woman. Her mother, short on girl's names after eight others, called her April, after the month.

April was not afraid of being a woman. She had been cursed with a fully developed body since she was ten. Her oldest brother first took her when she was eleven. As the youngest of seventeen children, she had few rights.

She pulled her long, graceful legs up under her and peered intently through pale blue eyes toward the end of the run. She brushed back a springy curl of long sandy hair that drooped over her high, stately cheekbone and strained toward the sounds carried on the night wind.

There was the distinct babble of the water in the run. The miniature stream, swollen by spring rains, leaped across the stones in the creek bed seeking an escape from the channel. A nocturnal predator shrieked; tiny, furry feet padded cautiously, and "April...April," someone called her name!

The voice was soft, quiet. It might be just the rustle of a pine branch. The voice pleaded. It was enticing, filled with anticipation, cunning, and malevolence. It wanted her! Someone *wanted* her! *Something* wanted her! "April...April."

Why was she afraid of the voice? If someone out on the run wanted her, why shouldn't she go? Nobody here ever wanted her for just her. They wanted her body. They wanted her to cook, clean, sew, mend, or wash their clothes. Nobody ever cared what she wanted. The voice *sounded* like it cared. She knew that couldn't be. Only Caleb and Ida ever really cared, and they were both gone.

The door to the hovel in which April lived burst open and Jubal, the last of her nine brothers who still lived at home, walked onto the porch in his longjohns. "Git back in here you stupid bitch, afore you ketch pneumonia."

He grabbed her roughly by the shoulders, and guided her into the house and into his bed. In her dreams, the night wind called her name.

Breakfast at the Marsh cabin was always chaotic. As usual, everyone demanded, cursed, and complained. Jubal and five of the girls still lived at home. Three

older sisters and one brother were dead. The other seven boys left in search of work. No one ever came back of their own accord.

April's father, paralyzed in a mine accident when she was ten, lay on a tiny cot in the corner of the kitchen. The doctor who stopped by last spring was surprised to find him still alive. He had expressed doubts that Ephraim would last much longer. Her mother, worn out by the weight of her years, fussed about everything. Nobody remembered, or cared, that it was her birthday.

When the others disappeared into the misty morning to tend to the chores, she was left to clean up the breakfast debris. As she tidied up around her father, he clutched at her arm with a pale hand.

"Honey, reach under my pillow." His tired eyes twinkled as the corners of his lips curled into a thin smile.

April cautiously placed a delicate hand under the edge of the grimy, sweat-stained pillow. When she brought it out again, it clutched a tiny, wooden bird. It was a common raven, whittled with extraordinary patience and dexterity from a piece of pine wood. It was complete down to tapered tips on the feathers and dimples near the edge of the beak.

"Happy birthday, child. I wish I could give you a proper present. That's the best I can do from this damned bed. I know I won't be around much longer. When I'm gone, the bird will call me to mind."

She threw her arms tightly around his frail neck and cried, "Oh, thank you, Daddy," as tears of love and gratitude crept from her closed eyes and crawled down her cheeks.

"Now child, why do you look so peaked? You not been sleepin'?" His voice was tinged with concern. "You're supposed to have bloom in your cheeks."

"I can't sleep, Daddy." She bit her lip and decided to confide in him. "Daddy, for the past two weeks I been hearin' voices from up ta the run. Every night, 'bout midnight or so, someone calls to me from up near the top of the nob.

"Nonsense, girl! That's just plain foolishness. Ain't nobody up there. No way. You're just hearin' the night calls of the animals. Besides, I told you never to go out there in the dark by yourself."

His voice had taken on a harsh tone, and she felt his fear. He was afraid. Afraid of what? Afraid for her? "Daddy, what's wrong? What are you afraid of?"

"Nothin'! You know that! Ain't one goddamned thing in this whole earth that puts fear in Ephraim Marsh!" His lip quivered, and the performance failed to convince her. "Now, git on with your chores afore ya dally the whole damn day away."

A warm spring day in the mountains of West Virginia is one of God's special gifts. This was one of those days. April spent much of it in the field in front of the house, clearing remnants of the winter from is bosom in anticipation of spring planting. Several times she turned toward the run, sure that someone was watching her. Nobody was ever there.

After supper, April sat in front of the fireplace darning one of Jubal's socks. Her father called to her from the cot. "April honey, come here...please."

"Yes, Daddy. What can I get you?" He looked drawn and insignificant, bundled in the stained comforter.

"April, promise me that you won't go out of this house tonight no matter what."

"Why?" She looked at him quizzically.

"Just please your old man, sugar. I lost one of my girls to that damned run. I don't want to lose another one. Promise me, no matter what, or *who* you think you hear callin' to you, *stay in the house!*"

She remembered her sister. Ida had been her favorite. She was three years older than April and the next girl up the line. No one knew exactly what happened to her. She had been particularly despondent after Caleb, the brother next to Ida in age, went to the city. April suspected they were lovers. Since he was murdered, she nearly lost her mind.

She went to his grave in the old cemetery a the bottom of the run every day.

One cold spring night, a little over a year ago, she slipped out of the house. The next morning, they found her pale, cold body by the stream near the cemetery. April even heard talk at the church about Ida's ghost walking the run on moonlit nights.

"O.K. Daddy, I'll stay in the house."

April went to bed shortly after their conversation. Still sore from Jubal's assault, she wanted no part of him tonight. She crawled over her sister Ellie into her spot next to the window.

She sat up in the blackness, drenched in sweat. Her side of the bed was soaked. She shivered from the cold in the room. The dream was so real. "April...April." That was no dream! It came from outside the window.

Afraid to look, yet unable to resist, she peeked out at the moon-bathed field. Pure white beams of light from the full moon covered the empty field. The yard under the window was empty, too.

"April...April." There, across the field near the edge of the run, stood a tall, willowy figure, raven hair flapping in the night breeze. She beckoned to April.

April leaped out of bed. "I'm coming. I'm coming." Forgetting the promise to her father, she raced toward the night call.

She hardly noticed the cold on her bare feet as she dashed across the misty meadow. She waved frantically. The apparition waved back. As April approached, the figure backed slowly up the run with April in hot pursuit. Past the first stand of maple and oaks, it stopped by the entrance to the unkempt cemetery.

April was out of breath. She stood panting by an ancient pin oak and looked at the figure across the ten yards that separated them. It was Ida, and it wasn't. The tall, small-busted, long-legged body was the same. The raven hair was still rich and thick. The face had Ida's unblemished porcelain skin. The shell of her once-beautiful sister remained. What was so different?

It was her eyes! Ida was always proud of her large, brown, expressive eyes. They were now cold, lifeless, hard. They fixed on April with such intensity that she felt as though she could touch the gaze. A thin, evil smile curled the corners of pale, dead lips.

"Welcome, little sister. We've been waiting for you. We knew you'd come. Why shouldn't you come? No one back there wants you. They never did. We were your only friends then. We are your only friends now. Come to us, little sister. Here, you can live with us forever. We love you. We always have. We will for all eternity. There is only love here. Come."

The figure moved into the forlorn cemetery. A second specter materialized beside her. It was Caleb. Dear, sweet Caleb. He looked almost the same as the last day she saw him. Almost. His eyes burned with the same cold fierceness. His lips curled in the same sardonic smile.

"Come, April. We're not ghosts. We're alive. We will live forever. You can too. When I went to the city, I met a wonderful woman. She gave me eternal life. Just a kiss on the neck. It won't hurt. You know we always loved you. No one else ever did." He held out his arms and the coldness of his expression seemed to melt. April walked into his waiting embrace.

*

Ephraim Marsh lay in his cold, dark corner and turned the wooden raven over and over in his hand. The flickering firelight cast menacing dancing shadows across the furniture. He had no more tears to cry. His baby was gone. The one joy in his fruitless existence lay rotting in the grave at the foot of the accursed run.

They found her almost exactly where they had found Ida. No one had any idea how she died. No one, except him, cared enough to want to find out. What could he do from this bed? She looked so tiny and helpless in the rough pine coffin. Why did she go to the run? What was up there? If only he could walk. Damn it! Damn

it! Damn it!

He turned his face from the firelight and tried to sleep. What was that noise? Was it a pine branch on the window pane? "Daddy...Daddy. Don't worry, Daddy. I know you can't walk. I'll come to you." He found new tears to cry. Tears of joy.

- The End -

[Jack L. Summers, author of "Night Call," accepted or published works:

"Eleven to Seven," Tarsong, September 1991.
"Caleb," Miss Lucy Westenra Society of the Undead, May 1992.
"Kraken Live," The Gate, July 1992 issue.
"April's Dream," Good Guys Wear Fangs, May 1992.
"The Resting Place," Vlad the Impaler Vol. III, Pulbication deate July 1992.
"Appalachian Bluebeard," Aberations Accepted for publication, date pending.

VAMPYR

I am bound,
called,
seduced by the blood
surging hotly beneath your pale skin.
You come to me unknowing,
blank-eyed and silent,
awaiting my whim...my desire.

So soft.
Your skin is so soft,
silky beneath my callused fingertips.
I could caress it for hours,
reveling in the smoothness,
but my hunger urges me onward.

Your head tilts slowly back,
straightening the slim, ivory column
of your throat.
I lean closer,
the blood-scent strong in my nostrils,
filling my senses with its virgin heat.

Your flesh yields to my fangs,
the warm sweetness filling my mouth,
blazing sparks in my belly,
that warm me with your fire.

You will never recall this chance encounter,
never fondly remember the thought of me,
our sharing of souls,
sweet act of communion,
but I'll always remember the essence of you.

-Lisa Savignano

WEST

HEART OF A KNIGHT

by

Diana Smith & Pat Dunn

"There, my Nicolas, did I not promise you the tastiest morsel in France?"

The sibilant voice spoke in Nick's ear, a voice he'd already come to hate. It was the voice of his master, the creature who had turned him into this monster.

"Delectable, isn't she? And she's yours for the taking," the voice continued.

Nick tried to tune out LaCroix's taunting, but the lure of the woman was as strong as LaCroix's urgings.

The dark pair stood in the shadows of the great hall of House Thanos, watching the guests of the Baroness enjoy the evening's entertainment. The Baroness herself was the focus of Nick's attention, her alabastrine skin glowing invitingly in the candlelight. Waist-length raven curls framed an exquisite face that was dominated by luminous ebony eyes. "She's beautiful," he admitted.

"And you *want* her, don't you, Nicolas?"

The blond man shifted uneasily.

"Then *take* her!" LaCroix whispered, his fingers caressing his companion's shoulder. "Tonight."

"I don't want to kill her," Nick told him

In the shadows, LaCroix's feral eyes gleamed. "Fool! Killing is what we do best."

Nick was mesmerized by the beauty of the woman as she moved among her guests. "But *why?* I'm tired of the killing."

The gleam in LaCroix's evil eyes would have told Nick that that was exactly *why*, but the young vampire's gaze was on the exquisite woman and not on his master.

"Then you're tired of living," LaCroix retorted, spinning his apprentice to face him. Forcing Nick to meet his eyes, he went on, as if lecturing a dullard, "Your Life comes from their deaths. It is the nature of things! You are a vampire, and they are cattle. Don't you remember what happened the last time you tried to go without killing?"

Nick squeezed his eyes shut and gave a brief nod. The bloodlust had taken him after a month, and the results had been terrible. He'd fallen on a family of gypsies, caught out after dark away from the caravan. Four people dead, even the babe in arms...

"Don't resist, my Nicolas. Do as your nature dictates."

"Yes," the former knight said tonelessly. He pulled away from LaCroix and moved toward the banqueting hall. Standing on the edge of the light, half-hidden in the shadows, he watched the Baroness Thanos, unaware of the cruel smile playing over LaCroix's lips.

Nick paced along the fringe of the crowd, managing to keep the Baroness in sight. He frowned at the handsome courtier who offered her an arm to lead the next dance, and a stab of jealousy lanced through Nick when she placed a small hand on the offered arm and smiled as they prepared to begin the dance. Nick grabbed the

hand of the nearest woman and pulled her to the line of dancers, his gaze on the beautiful Baroness Thanos.

Even when his back was to her, Nick was acutely aware of her location. Hands clasped behind his back, he finally reached his goal and faced the Baroness.

Curtsying, the Baroness looked up at her new partner and Nick captured her gaze with his own. He held out his hand and she slowly placed her fingers on his palm.

For the first time in decades, Nick found himself drawn to the soul of a woman, drowning in the sadness shining in her black eyes.

"My lady," he finally said, bringing her fingers to his lips.

She inclined her head in gracious acknowledgment, her gaze never leaving his. "Are you one of the entertainers, or one of my guests?" she asked, her sultry voice sending shivers of delight down his spine.

"Perhaps--an entertaining guest," he said, lowering her hand but wrapping his fingers possessively around hers. He smiled, giving the fleeting impression of sunlight peeking from behind clouds. "If my lady will allow me that privilege?"

"Perhaps I shall," she said, not disengaging her hand from his for the space of a heartbeat. Then, as she dropped her gaze to their intertwined fingers, Nick reluctantly released her, sliding his fingertips across her soft palm. His dark blue eyes held her black ones in a piercing look of silent communication.

"After the dance is finished," she murmured. "Welcome to House Thanos, M'sieur--"

"Chevalier," he supplied, smiling inwardly at the alias which mocked his former occupation. "Nicolas Chevalier."

The noblewoman had already turned to her next partner, but at his words she paused and looked at him with infinite sadness. "Nicholas... My own Nicholas has left me alone."

Then she was gone, swept away in the dance, and Nick stood facing another woman.

So--the late Baron had shared his name. It should make the seduction easier...

But not the kill. Only vaguely aware of his new partner, Nick studied the shadows, but there was no sign of LaCroix. Yet, Nick knew he was nearby, could feel the elder vampire's presence, his influence.

The dance ended and Nick made a bow to his nameless partner, his gaze once more seeking the Baroness.

She was speaking with a giant of a man who dwarfed her dainty frame. Shamelessly Nick focused his hearing on the conversation.

"...that the entertainment is continuous," she was saying. "While one group performs, the others may eat or rest. I shall retire but there is no reason my guests should suffer, because I have no heart for this."

"My lady, you must not give up hope," her manservant began.

"Liam, he is gone," she interrupted, despair filling her voice. "We both must face the truth that he is no longer a part of my life, and I must endure an eternity of loneliness."

"*I* will not leave you, my lady," Liam swore fiercely, taking her hand. "I cannot believe the master stopped loving you--"

"I shall never cease loving him, but he is gone." she said, touching his cheek. "You do not have to remain with me, if you wish to start a new life."

The giant drew himself up and glared at her. "I have sworn to serve you until the end of my days."

"I am grateful, for I do not know what I would do without you, old friend," she said, clasping one large hand in both of hers. "If you will oversee our guests, I shall retire now."

The steward inclined his head and moved aside to speak with a passing servitor. But his eyes lingered worriedly on his mistress as she looked pensively out over the crowded hall.

Nick watched as her gaze swept the dancers and musicians, jugglers and

mummers, finally coming to rest on him. He felt a thrill of excitement as his eyes met hers, and started toward her at once.

When he stood before the Baroness, she looked up into his face, her penetrating gaze seeming to read his soul. For a moment, he wondered if she suspected that he had eavesdropped on her conversation, but then he dismissed the notion as ridiculous. "My lady," he began, giving a courtly bow. "You have not forgotten your promise, I hope?"

"Not...forgotten," she assured him with a sweetly sad smile. "But perhaps tomorrow evening would be better. I fear I am not up to entertaining just now."

"But--I thought I was to entertain *you*, Madame," Nick said, fighting a slight sense of panic. LaCroix would not be pleased...

She considered, then smiled and shook her head. "Tomorrow, M'sieur Chevalier."

"I cannot help my name," he blurted, as she turned away. "I'm sorry if it has upset you, my lady. I would gladly change it if--" He stopped as she looked at him once more.

"It is not just the name, M'sieur Chevalier. I am weary; heartsick, if you will. The gaiety is empty, so meaningless without my Nicholas. The eternity that stretches before me is terrifying, filled with a loneliness I never dreamed existed. He has condemned me to this because I dared to love him."

So the Baron was not dead after all, merely neglectful, Nick thought. And if she was truly as weary of living as she said, then maybe what he had to offer her would be a mercy... He shook his head, and blinked, realizing she was gone.

Nick whirled, scanning the hall, but there was no sign of the beautiful woman. He weaved his way through the throng, searching for her, then came to an abrupt halt as LaCroix appeared before him

"What game are you playing, Nicolas?" he asked, head tilted back and looking down at Nick. "Are you the cat toying with the mousling? It *can* make the kill sweeter."

Nick glared at his master, fear and defiance warring for dominance in his expression. "I said I would do it, LaCroix. You don't need to spy on me!"

"Don't I?" LaCroix said softly. He held the younger vampire's eyes, until Nick dropped his gaze after a half a minute. "Well then, Nicolas--*do* it." He stepped out of his fledgling's path with an expansive gesture.

"In my own time and in my own way," Nick said, pausing before his master and briefly meeting the commanding gaze.

"Of course, Nicolas," LaCroix agreed, holding his hands up in mock surrender. "But if you don't want her, then she's mine."

"In my own time, LaCroix," Nick reiterated, shoving his way past the elder vampire.

LaCroix watched, eyes glittering with bloodlust and a smile curving his lips.

Nick walked rapidly from the banqueting hall and leaned against the wall in the passage outside, grateful for the coldness of the stone against his cheek. He shut his eyes and clenched his fists, unable to shut out the repellent image of LaCroix hovering over the young Baroness, his hands touching her body... "No," he whispered. "I must spare her *that*."

He pushed away from the wall and moved down the flagstoned passage, his senses alert on locating his prey.

* * *

Varina Thanos stood alone in her bedchamber, the hairbrush she held forgotten at her side. "Nicholas," she murmured, remembering how her lord had been accustomed to brushing her flowing curls. "Oh, Nicholas, why couldn't you still love me, as I love you!?"

"He must be mad," a soft male voice said, and she whirled, scanning the shadows until she discerned the figure of Nicolas Chevalier. "How could he leave you alone, Madame?" He took a step toward her, hands upraised to show he carried

no weapons. "I could never do it, my sorrowful lady."

"He said it was necessary, because he loved me so much," she said, turning to place her hairbrush on the table beside the bed. "I don't feel loved."

"I can change that," Nick said, taking her hands and pulling her close, then bringing her hands to his lips.

"Only *my* Nicholas can change that," she corrected, immense sadness shining in her black eyes. "I gave him my heart, but it wasn't enough." She gently disengaged her hands from his and turned away from him. "You are persistent, M'sieur Chevalier, to invite yourself to my chambers. But I have no heart for company--"

"May I ask a boon, my lady?" he interrupted. "Allow me to just hold you, offer you the comfort of my arms." He put his hands on her shoulders, bent to kiss the spot just in front of one ear. "That's all I request, my lady."

She closed her eyes and leaned back, resting her head against his chest. "I have missed that so much..."

Nick maneuvered them to her bed, sat and held her in his lap. He was aware of the sound of her heartbeat, and he felt the bloodlust rising. "You are cold, my lady," he murmured, nuzzling her throat as she lay against his chest. "Please don't be afraid of me. I won't hurt you..." His canines lengthened and grazed the delicate skin. With a silent snarl, Nick twisted his head away from the temptation.

"Is something wrong?" she asked softly.

One hand tangled in the waist-length curls. "Nay, my lady," he said running his lips along her neck. "I am overwhelmed by your beauty."

She turned, placed her fingertips against his lips. "No more pretty words, M'sieur Chevalier. Give me only your arms, the comfort of being held as if you cared for me."

He nodded dumbly, not certain of his voice. The bloodlust faded as quickly as it had come, driven away by her despair.

"Thank you," she whispered, closing her eyes and laying her head trustingly on his shoulder.

Nick swallowed hard, his arms convulsively tightening around her. She sighed and lay still, her soft regular breathing signaling sleep within minutes.

It had been a long time since any woman had requested his protection, since he had recalled his Crusader's vows of purity. She brought his former life back in vivid clarity, and he realized just how far he had fallen into damnation.

LaCroix was fond of saying that the Night People could not go to Hell, since they were immortal. But Nick knew that was a lie. Since meeting Janette and LaCroix more than a century before, Nick had existed in a never-ending nightmare of blood and desire, hunger and satiation through the death of innocents. Love was a word he said frequently, without ever experiencing it.

I won't let him kill you, Nick thought, looking down at the woman in his arms. *I don't know how, but I will stop him.*

He sat with her all night, as the candle burnt itself out, and the castle was shrouded in darkness and silence. Finally, he rose, gently settling her under the bedcovers.

He bent and kissed her forehead, then left the room to seek a dark corner where he could conceal himself during the day.

* * *

The castle reflected the mood of its mistress. Gone were the revelers, the entertainers and the bright smiles on the faces of her servants. Melancholy lay upon them like a shroud, and Nick found the somber mood disquieting.

Whispers from the servants told him the Baroness had remained in her chambers all day, refusing to see even the devoted Liam.

The Baroness was in her bedchamber sitting in a chair that faced an open window. She was staring out at the growing darkness as if seeking someone.

"My lady?"

She turned at the sound of Nick's voice, gifting him with a smile that tore at the heart he'd thought dead. "You may call me Varina, M'sieur. After last night, you have earned such familiarity, I think."

Stepping out of the shadows, he knelt at her feet, kissed her hand and then refused to relinquish it. "I deserve nothing," he protested. "But you do not deserve such unhappiness."

She touched his cheek with her free hand, her gaze melting into his. "Once my Nicholas said the same thing, yet I have known the blackest despair of my life since he rode away. I have not had so much as a letter from him." She covered her face with her hands. "I have come to despise this life!"

Now was the time, yet Nick hesitated until he heard LaCroix's voice echoing in his mind. "Please forgive me, my lady," he whispered, rising to his feet and taking her in his arms. He pushed her head to one side, baring her neck and he sank his teeth into the tender flesh.

Instead of the pulsing warmth, his mouth was filled with fire and he threw his head back with a howl of pain.

Releasing her, Nick stumbled back and stood staring at her in dumbfounded amazement.

"My Lady?" came a servant's voice at the chamber door. "Are you all right?!"

Nick threw a glance over his shoulder, then sprang from the window. He leapt from it, just as Liam burst into the room

The Irishman reached the window in time to see a dark figure disappearing into the shadows. "My Lady?" he questioned turning toward Varina.

She stood stock-still, one hand pressed to the bleeding wounds on her neck, her eyes staring at the window. She turned her gaze on Liam. "He thought I was human," she said, before she collapsed.

Liam caught Varina and settled her in her bed, calling a maid to attend her before going down, grim-faced, to summon the men and begin a search of the grounds.

* * *

"You unutterable *fool*!" LaCroix raged, as Nick stood before him. "You've botched it!"

"It's wrong," Nick said hoarsely. He rubbed his throat. "We must leave this place at once."

"Coward," LaCroix sneered. "You've wanted to fail all along, haven't you? *Noble* Crusader--"

Nick winced at the venom in his master's voice. "You don't understand! She's not a mortal. She's like us!"

An unholy light glowed in LaCroix's eyes. "One of us?"

"Not exactly," Nick hastened to say. "Her blood burned like--like holy water. How can that be, LaCroix?"

"She must be destroyed, Nicolas," his master said after a moment of thoughtful pacing. "She is an aberration, a danger to us. She now knows what you are and will try to destroy you. You must kill her, Nicolas."

The blond man stared as LaCroix, then pounded his fist into the wall beside him. "Is killing your solution to everything?! She won't be any danger to us if we leave *now*--"

"Is running away *your* solution to everything?" LaCroix cut in, his cold features implacable. He stepped forward suddenly, one long arm grasping Nick's tunic. "I hope you're not defying me, Nicolas. I dislike having to punish you."

A *frisson* of fear rippled down Nick's spine as LaCroix's gaze held his, then he shook off his master's grasp. "I am not a child."

"You are *my* child, Nicolas, and never forget it," LaCroix hissed. "The same blood runs in our veins. *I* brought you over and gave you your first kill. You belong to me, Nicolas." He tightened his grasp on Nick's tunic and pulled him so they were nearly touching noses. "She dies, either by your hand or mine."

LaCroix's insistence puzzled Nick. it was almost as if he feared the Baroness, saw her as a threat to his power.

"Why does she frighten you so much, LaCroix?" Nick asked evenly.

In answer, LaCroix snarled and flung him aside. Nick landed heavily on the cellar floor, and by the time he had regained his feet, LaCroix was gone.

Nick could only hope that he'd reach the Baroness before LaCroix did.

* * *

The maid sat on a chair beside the Baroness, carefully watching over her sleeping mistress. Nick slipped up behind her, silencing her protests by mentally commanding her to sleep.

He stood by the bed, looking down at the-- Woman? Vampire? The bandage on her throat was stained with blood and Nick winced at the memory. Her head moved restlessly on the pillow and Nick knelt down. "My lady?"

The beautiful black eyes fluttered open, staring at him in bewilderment before recognition dawned. One dainty hand went to her throat and shame flooded Nick. "You--"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," he said, reaching for her hand and drawing back. "I didn't know-- I thought you were--but it burned."

"Because I am as you," she said, lowering her hand. "Such activity is not possible between those of our blood."

Nick slowly shook his head, giving her a puzzled look. "There can be no sustenance between us, but that's part of how we make love."

She sat up, staring at him. "No. Loukas said it is forbidden. That's why Nicholas left me, because such intimacy is impossible."

"Someone lied to you, my lady. Intimacy with mortals is impossible," Nick said with a shake of his head. "But I have tasted the blood of vampires, and never have I felt such a violent reaction. Your blood--burnt like holy water."

Now it was Varina's turn to give a shake of the head. "Holy water has no adverse reactions, nor do crosses or other holy relics."

"Do not listen to her, Nicolas. I told you she was dangerous."

Nick turned as LaCroix stepped out of the shadows. "Why is it different for *her*?"

"That is the danger, my Nicolas," LaCroix said with a smile. "She would convince you that the sun is no danger, and you would burn to death."

"No! If the exposure to the sun is too intense, too long a period of time it can be dangerous but to walk about in sunlight is not impossible," Varina protested.

"You see, already she begins to weave her lies," LaCroix said with a shake of his head. "I shall take care of her for you, Nicolas."

Realizing what LaCroix had planned, Nick grabbed him by the shoulders only to be flung against the stone wall of the chamber. Stunned, he slumped to the floor, watching helplessly as LaCroix overpowered the Baroness and gathered her in his arms.

"You see what I do for you, Nicolas?" LaCroix taunted as he carried the unconscious Varina to the window. "You will owe me your allegiance for his rescue." With that, he leaped out the window, taking Varina with him.

Nick had forgotten about the maid, and she awoke to find her mistress gone and a strange man in the room. Her screams brought an armed Liam before Nick could struggle to his feet to follow LaCroix.

"What have you done with my lady?" Liam demanded, aiming a loaded crossbow at Nick's heart.

"I didn't--but I can follow him," Nick said, holding his hands up in surrender. "He intends to kill her and if we don't hurry, he will do it."

Liam studied the intruder, then nodded and lowered the crossbow. "You will lead me to my lady."

"Yes, of course," Nick agreed, a cautious eye on the crossbow at Liam's side.

"But we must hurry!" Did he have time to make it through the window before the steward could raise his weapon? He was still a little groggy from LaCroix's attack and he suspected his master was forcing his influence, exerting control over him. And if he was used to dealing with vampires, then the Baroness' steward was a true threat.

"I think I know where he will take her," Nick continued. "Is there a ruined church or abbey nearby? Some place that is no longer holy?"

Liam considered, then nodded. "I wish the master had not left my lady. I have sent for him but I fear it will be too late."

Another master vampire--just what Nick wanted to face. But if he could help defeat LaCroix, then this Nicholas would be welcomed, and Nick would deal with the consequences later. Besides, someone needed to set him straight if he'd abandoned Varina because he believed they couldn't be intimate. "We can't wait to see if he decides to answer your message," Nick told the steward. "LaCroix plans to kill the Baroness."

Liam raised his crossbow, a determined set to his jaw. "I will cut his heart out slowly, if he harms my lady."

"And I will help you," Nick promised, daring to pat the man's shoulder. "A knight defends his lady, my friend."

Liam nodded, motioned for Nick to lead the way, then caught Nick by the arm. "I will not hesitate to kill you if you betray my lady," he promised with deadly calm.

"I will bare my chest for your blade if we fail," Nick swore, wondering at the guilt, an emotion he'd though lost with his humanity. "Let's be gone."

* * *

"My Nicolas should be the one to do this, to tighten my hold on him," LaCroix crooned as he settled Varina on the former altar. Weakened by her depression and the absence of Nicholas' influence, the vampiress was at LaCroix's mercy. Her will was no longer her own for as she had told Nick, she had lost her heart.

"Your master should not have left you so vulnerable, little one," he continued, stroking her velvety cheek. "Under other circumstances, I would take over and make you *my* fledgling. But the purity of your heart is too dangerous, for you would show Nicolas there is another way for us, a way of goodness. You would make him remember what he was, his vows as a knight and defender of good. And I cannot allow that, my lovely."

Varina moaned and turned her head, but LaCroix grasped her chin in his hand and forced her to look at him. "He is mine."

"No," she whispered, dark eyes wide. "Someday he will see you for what you are, and he will hate you for what you have done to him, what you have forced him to do."

"The only way Nicolas will be free of me is to kill me," LaCroix said with a smugness that told Varina of his certainty that Nick could never do it. He twisted her chin to expose her neck, and with his free hand he caressed her throat. "He said your blood burned like holy water, which tells me your heart has remained pure, that your soul has not been given to evil. Corrupting you would be--exquisite," he hissed, leaning down and kissing her throat.

Varina whimpered and closed her eyes as he ran his tongue along her skin. "I will never kill. We only share life, not take it."

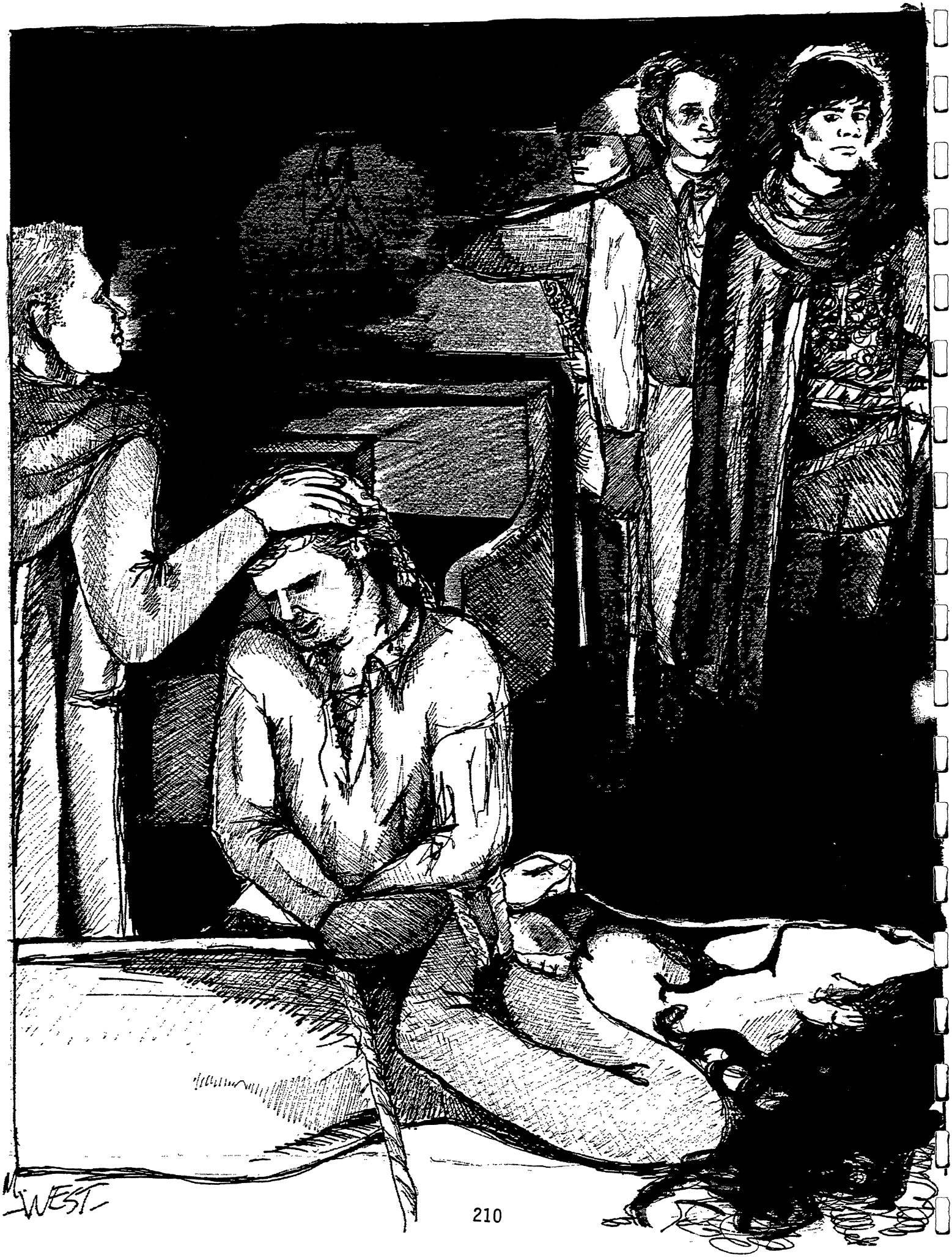
"Yes, I have heard of your kind," LaCroix said, drawing back and studying her. "One of Alexandre's converts."

"You know Loukas? And my Nicholas?" Hope flared in her eyes, quickly fading. "He has left me because I tricked him. I wanted to be with him forever but I am fated to an eternity of loneliness."

"Join with us."

"*No*."

"Pity. You could have given Janette some competition." LaCroix shrugged,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caressed her cheek in a careless manner, and pulled his sword from its scabbard. "I wish I could promise you a quick and painless death, but what's the fun in that?"

Varina tried to sit up, but found he had secured her to the altar with ropes. Bewilderment shone in her eyes and he threw his head back in wild laughter. "Why are you doing this?" she asked, proving the innocence of her soul as she clearly did not understand the pleasure LaCroix found in torture.

"I hope Nicolas arrives in time to share in the pleasure."

"I am here, LaCroix."

"I knew you couldn't resist," LaCroix purred, turning his back on Varina to face his apprentice as Nick stepped out of the shadows.

"Let her go."

"Nicolas," LaCroix chided, a half-smile curving one side of his mouth, "you know I can't do that."

"And you know I can't let you kill this one," Nick said, walking along the inner wall of the ruined church, keeping his back to the wall. He smiled as LaCroix's attention followed, as he had known it would. When Liam arrived with the armed guards, Nick hoped to keep LaCroix distracted long enough for Liam to use his crossbow.

"You're in need of a lesson, my child," LaCroix said with a shake of his head.

"Without my Nicholas I don't wish to live," Varina cried, and Nick glanced at her.

"You don't know what you're saying, my lady. Isn't he worth fighting for?" Nick asked, hoping to spark her will to live, the strength to fight LaCroix.

"I would fight, but only if I believed he truly wanted me," she said bitterly.

"It's no wonder he left, if you have so little faith in him," Nick said, letting disgust creep into his voice.

"Stalling for time, Nicolas? Think to change my mind?" LaCroix interrupted.

"Not yours--only hers," Nick said with a nod at Varina.

"She wants to die, and I can oblige her," LaCroix said turning his back on the other vampire and raising his sword over the bound woman.

"*NO!*" Nick launched himself at his master, literally flying across the ruins to grapple with LaCroix.

Enraged at this interference from his troublesome fledgling, LaCroix snarled and slashed at Nick with both sword and fangs.

Bleeding from his throat and forearm, reeling from LaCroix's mental assault, Nick nevertheless interposed himself between his master and Varina. "I won't..."

"On your knees, Nicolas," LaCroix commanded, his terrible yellow eyes flashing with power over the injured vampire. "Kneel and watch her die."

"No," Nick said, clinging to the side of the altar. He tried to look away, but LaCroix's gaze held him pinned, draining his strength and his will. Slowly he knelt and bowed his head, shame flooding him at his weakness.

"Yes," crooned LaCroix, resting his hand on the top of Nick's head as a mortal man might pat his faithful mastiff. "My obedient Nicolas may snap a bit now and then, but in the end, he knows his master!" With a rough gesture, he jerked Nick's head up by the hair, forcing him to look at the frightened vampiress. "Watch her and do not look away until it is finished!"

He left Nick and walked toward his victim, the sword upraised.

"Stop this!" a voice shouted from the church's entrance.

LaCroix whirled to find the Baroness' steward aiming a crossbow bolt at his heart. Flanking the tall man on either side were three guardsmen, all similarly armed.

While LaCroix sized up this new threat, two horsemen thundered up and halted before the ruined building. Their riders dismounted and strode quickly into the church.

"Nicholas!" Varina cried, struggling against her bonds. Nick watched,

unmoving, as the tall warrior ran to her side and sliced through her ropes with his dagger. "Oh, Nicholas!" She flung her arms around his neck, and he scooped her up from the altar, setting her onto the ground beside him.

"Are you all right, Varina?" demanded Nicholas Tannek. His left arm embraced her close to his side, while his right hand held his sword at LaCroix's breast. "Have they harmed you?!"

Varina buried her face against his tunic. "I thought I'd never see you again, Nicholas."

Pain flashed in Tannek's dark eyes, then his jaw set determinedly. "You will die for this, M'sieur."

LaCroix turned his head and looked at the other vampire. "You're not the first to threaten *me* with that particular fate." Raising his voice, he addressed the second rider, who had remained near the bowmen. "You need to control your followers better, Alexandre. No vampire ever kills one of his own kind! It's the surest way to exclusion by those of the Blood."

Loukas Alexandre strode forward and halted before the captive. "In your case, LaCroix, I doubt it would be any great loss." He glanced at Nick, who still knelt, gaze fixed on the empty alter. "Release him."

LaCroix hesitated, then made a careless gesture with his left hand.

Nick doubled over, pain and humiliation assaulting his body and soul.

Alexandre went to him and knelt beside him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You're injured, my friend. Can you stand?"

Nick glanced at him in bewilderment, then nodded and let the master vampire assist him to his unsteady feet.

"He's *mine*," LaCroix warned. "Stay away from him!"

Alexandre ignored the threat, tilting Nick's head back and examining the wounds on his throat. "I think you Hunger, don't you?"

Shamed, Nick nodded, not meeting the elder vampire's eyes.

"But you've not feed?"

"Not this week," Nick got out, pushing away the thought of his attack on Varina.

"Then there's hope for you yet. Go hunting--and I do mean *hunting*. Find a stag in the forest and take your fill from it. Then come back and we'll talk again."

Nick hesitated before the glowering LaCroix. "You never told me there was another way!" Then he was gone, melting into the shadows of the night.

"You've made a mistake, Alexandre," LaCroix said angrily. "Nicolas is mine--he'll come back and free me--"

"Be quiet," Tannek ordered, pressing his sword tip into LaCroix's skin. As the captive vampire fell silent, Tannek went on, "So *you're* not the only master who lies to his fledglings, Loukas?" The sarcasm was evident.

Varina looked up at Nicholas, puzzled.

Before Loukas could respond, Nicholas called to his servant, "Liam, chain this one to the east wall of the courtyard, and guard him until sunrise. By then I'll know what to do with him."

Fear flickered in LaCroix's eyes as he was manacled and led away.

Nicholas Tannek turned to his mentor, hate in his voice. "Tell Varina the truth you hid from us both, Loukas."

"It was for your own good, Nicholas," Loukas began, shaken by the depth of Nicholas' anger.

"As decided by *you*," Nicholas interrupted. "It was your decision to separate us, your decision that we had to live in deeper loneliness than I have ever known. How much of that decision was dictated by jealousy?

"Jealousy? But Loukas said it was impossible for us to be together," Varina interrupted with a frown. "He said we could not...be intimate, yet M'sieur Chevalier said those of our Blood can only be intimate with each other, not with mortals. He truly believes that, Nicholas. He said we had been lied to...but he also believes holy relics are dangerous, as well as sunlight."

"For those who follow the path of evil, that is true," Loukas spoke up in his defense.

"Tell her why you decided we cannot be together," Nicholas interrupted, wanting to keep the discussion in the proper focus.

"I was only trying to protect the pair of you! I could see that you were in danger of becoming fixated on each other, seeking only one another and refusing to seek outside your relationship for the Blood vital to your survival. If you tried to provide sustenance for each other, you would soon die of starvation."

"That should be *our* decision, not yours," Nicholas snapped, glaring at his mentor. "I trusted you, Loukas, and you betrayed us both. Were you hoping that Varina would turn to you for comfort?"

The elder vampire stared at him in dismay. "No! I never meant--" Loukas broke off, his gaze sliding toward Varina. "Nicholas, I *am* sorry... I did not intend this to happen! I only meant to protect you--"

"I know what you meant," Nicholas interrupted. "Go and befriend that slave of LaCroix's, if you must. Maybe he will forgive you your lies. I shall not!"

Loukas stepped back, as though physically struck, then inclined his head. "As you wish, Nicholas."

"Get out of my sight, Loukas."

Silently the master vampire turned away.

"Wait!" Varina caught his sleeve and peered anxiously into his face. "It's not forbidden for me to stay with Nicholas?!"

Loukas met the vampiress's eyes and fleetingly touched her cheek. "It's not forbidden, Varina..."

"Except by him!"

Loukas winced at the scorn in Nicholas's voice, but continued steadily, "It can be dangerous, but it is possible. I am sorry, my lady. I...didn't realize how much I envied him for having won your heart." He pressed his lips to her hand and murmured, "Forgive me!"

"Forgive you? You dare to ask Varina's forgiveness? Have you no idea what she has gone through, the hell she has been in since you issued your decree? Who told her how to force the issue of Changing, and then told her we could not be together? Did you plan this all along? I have felt her despair, shared in it, even blamed myself for it. After four centuries I was lucky enough to find a woman who loved me for what I am, a woman who restored my soul. But you couldn't bear to see that, could you? You wanted what I had found--you wanted Varina and you set out to destroy our lives for your own gain."

"Enough! Perhaps I *was* jealous, envious of your good fortune but I was happy for you and given new hope for my own situation. if it could happen to one, it could happen to another. I didn't want you to destroy one another, to live with the pain and knowledge of that destruction. Could you live with the guilt, Nicholas, if she died and you did not? Would you want Varina to live with it? I am sorry for the pain you've gone through, but I truly believed it was for the best." Loukas' dark eyes shone with regret and sadness. "I have to live with what I've done, but I was trying to protect you."

Varina's voice was soft, but both men gave her their full attention when she said, "I thought Nicholas had left me alone all this time because he hated me for tricking him into bringing me to his Life."

"No, Varina, I never--"

She reached up and silenced him with her fingertips against his lips. Looking at Loukas, she said evenly, "I feared from the first that you would make Nicholas set me aside. That is why I wanted to Change, to become as he is. If it is truly so dangerous to live together, then what am I to do? I don't want to hurt Nicholas, but I cannot bear the thought of never seeing him again!"

"That is not going to happen, my dear," Nicholas swore, catching her hand and bringing it to his lips. "No matter what *he* says I shall never leave you again."

Loukas watched as they embraced, then discreetly turned away. He forced his clenched fists to relax, knowing that he had nothing more to say to them, and that

Nicholas would never listen to him in any case. It hurt that he had lost the knight's trust, and his friendship. if it had not been for Nicholas Tannek, he would have lost Liliah to the True Death, centuries ago... He smiled at the memory of the gentle Ethiopian woman he had first seen on the banks of the Nile. She had accepted Loukas, and the Change he brought to her, even when it meant they had to live apart from one another and seek mortals with which to share Life. In time, Liliah's affection for him cooled. But she had loved Nicholas... And the knight had risked the Change himself, knowing he risked it by offering her his blood when she had been grievously injured by the sun. Liliah had recovered, and for that alone Loukas had felt indebted to Tannek. He had guided the disoriented vampire through his transformation, after Nicholas had met his human death on the battlefield. But then Liliah had been slain by fire, and a part of Loukas' heart had died with her.

Closing his eyes, Loukas wondered if it was truly jealousy that had driven him to separate Nicholas from Varina. But they did not understand the danger! Loukas had nearly killed Liliah once, when she was newly fledged, and he was unable to leash his passion. He drew a trembling hand across his eyes, and slowly started toward the doorway, not looking at the lovers.

"Loukas."

Varina's voice drew him to a halt, but he did not turn around. He could not bear to meet those reproachful eyes, see the hurt he had caused.

"Is it true that my love will destroy Nicholas?"

That brought him around, and he took her hands. "Not your love in particular, little one, but there is great danger in becoming too obsessed with one another to the exclusion of all else. Perhaps if you agreed that between you there would be no nipping, no tasting of one another's blood... It's difficult to watch one's beloved exchanging passion with another."

"But if we could deal with those things, we could be together?" she asked, trust shining in her lovely dark eyes.

"We *will* be together," Nicholas interrupted with a hard warning glare at Loukas.

"Nicholas, don't be so angry that you ignore his warnings," Varina cautioned, placing a hand on his arm. "I believe that Loukas is not speaking out of jealousy, but true concern because he has seen it happen. He has been too good a friend to you for you to dismiss his love and friendship. We will stay together but we must listen to his advice on how to avoid the disaster."

"Advice? More lies, I dare say."

"I am not lying to you, Nicholas!" Loukas exclaimed. "Have you never wondered why I sent Liliah away?! Why I did not allow her to be with me for more than a few weeks? I *loved* her, just as you love Varina. She knew what I was, and was not afraid of me. After her Change, we stayed together--" he broke, closed his eyes, whispered, "until I nearly killed her!"

Silence followed his confession, then Varina reached out a comforting hand.

"You never told me this, Loukas."

"Yes, well, it's not something I'm very proud of," the older vampire said. "I could not control myself with her. I wish you better luck, Nicholas. You have always been a knight--perhaps you will succeed where I have failed."

He met the younger vampire's eyes in a measured look, then turned his head and stared at the shadows surrounding the doorway. "Come out, then."

Nick crept forward, unsure of these vampires. He'd never met any like them before. LaCroix's work, no doubt.

"Have you been there long?" Loukas demanded.

"Not very," Nick said, shrugging a little. The animal blood had strengthened him somewhat, and he felt better. "I want..."

"What?" snapped Loukas.

"To be human," came the answer, simply.

"You could begin by not being such an animal," Nicholas said, clearly disgusted with the vampire who had played such a part in Varina's near-destruction.

"Nicholas," Varina chided softly, running her hand up his arm to touch his cheek. "I think perhaps he has been lied to, as well, and knows no other way to be. He needs guidance, my love, not brow-beating. He did not want to kill me, but his master was determined and tried to force him. Nicolas Chevalier defied his master--for *me*, beloved. Don't we owe him something for that?"

Nicholas was lost in the ebony depths of her eyes and his lips twisted in an ironic smile. "Is this the way it will always be, my heart? I can deny you nothing," he said, enfolding her in his embrace.

Loukas smiled knowingly and nodded, his dark eyes reflecting both his happiness for the pair and his concern for them. But Nicholas had been right about one thing: it should be *their* decision, not his. He could only hope they would be able to avoid disaster, and be there for the survivor should it come to that.

"Master!"

Both Loukas and Nicholas turned at Liam's call.

"He has escaped," Liam informed them, looking at Nicholas. He killed Angus, ripped his throat like some beast--"

"LaCroix," Nick said softly, his eyes flaring with hatred. He tilted his head as if listening, then moved to stand beside Liam, looking out at the waning night.

"We've been inattentive," Loukas murmured. "Dangerous, where he is concerned."

"It's my fault," answered Nicholas, regretting the death of his man-at-arms. "I was venting my rage on you instead of dealing with him... I'm sorry, Loukas."

Loukas looked at him and nodded. "You had reason to be angry."

"Is he coming here?" Varina asked, her voice quavering a little as she glanced around.

"No," said Nick, turning to face her. "It's too near sunrise, and he has no shelter now. He's far away."

Her relief was evident, as she nestled against her lover's arm. "I'm glad."

Loukas approached the blond vampire. "You will need shelter yourself, Chevalier." He spoke the name with a questioning inflection, allowing the opportunity for correction.

Nick ignored the opportunity. "This will do for today," he said, gesturing at the desecrated chapel. "If I may?" He looked uncertainly at Tannek, "Tonight I will leave..."

"I plan to leave tonight as well," Loukas said before Nicholas could respond. "If you wish you may come with me, Chevalier. Perhaps I can answer some of your questions."

"I'd like that," Nick admitted.

"It's settled," Varina said, answering for her husband. "Thank you, M'sieur Chevalier. I shall never forget you!"

He bowed. "Nor I you, my lady."

Nicholas led her from the chapel, followed by the faithful Liam. Loukas went to his horse. "I shall see you again after sunset." He swung up into the saddle, even as Nicholas settled Varina on his own stallion.

Nick watched the group ride away, then studied the eastern horizon. The dark sky was already beginning to lighten. *I am waiting, Nicolas*, came the silent promise. With a shudder, Nick turned away, seeking refuge in the darkest corner.

****

EPILOGUE: 1992

Nick Knight looked at Varina Tannek as she stood in the center of the Phoenix Eye gallery, surrounded by well-wishers.

"Wait here," he said to Dr. Natalie Lambert. "I'll be right back." He crossed toward the small dark-haired woman, his expression thoughtful.

She looked up and smiled, clasping the hand he extended to her. "Thank you for coming tonight, Detective Knight."

"Thanks for the invitation, Mrs. Tannek." He shrugged slightly and smiled. "It's been a long time."

"Yes," she agreed seriously. "Loukas told us long ago that you had left him. We often wondered what had happened to you."

Nick glanced away, then looked down at her. "One night I heard LaCroix calling, and I knew he was on his way to get me back...and to kill Loukas. I didn't tell anyone, I just went out into the woods to face him on my own. I thought--" he stopped, shook his head. "I thought I was strong enough to take him, before he could harm the others."

With an ironic twist of his mouth, he added, "I was wrong. He found me and we fought. I lost." He looked at the compassionate hand she placed on his forearm. "It was a very long time before I finally left him for good. Then he always followed me, tried to turn me to the Darkness again... Six months ago, I killed him."

"It was necessary, Nick."

"Yes." Impulsively, he lifted her hand and touched his lips to her fingers. "Thank you, Varina. You taught me more than you'll ever know."

She smiled and touched his cheek. "Be at peace with yourself, Nicolas Chevalier."

"I'm still working on that one," he said honestly. "Someday maybe I will be." He released her hand and stepped back. "Good night, Varina."

"Good night," she replied, watching as he walked back to the woman he had escorted to the art show.

"Who's that?" Natalie inquired, peering unabashedly at the woman he had been talking with, making no effort to hide her curiosity.

Nick smiled and tucked her arm through his. "Varina Tannek; she owns this place, with her husband."

"Husband?" Natalie's eyebrows rose as she looked at the tall dark-haired man who had materialized at the beautiful woman's side. "They're friends of yours?"

"Very old friends," he agreed, mischief in his blue eyes. "And very dear ones."

"They're not--" she broke off, eyes widening.

Nick merely chuckled and led her out into the night.

-The End -

WEST

TEMPTATION

Again.
The temptation.
Touch.
A cool hand.
Sharp teeth.
Lips wet.
With blood.
Again.
The temptation.
Racing.
Chasing the pleasure
Against the hot dawn. Closer.
Closer.
Each night. Again.
This temptation.
Transformation.
Your blood, my life
One.

-Heidi Staneslow

BLOOD MATES

by

Ann Leonhart

Commander William Riker stretched his long arms above his head preparing to start a new day. Vatire hospitality was something else, he smiled to himself, remembering the night before. A raven haired beauty had slipped into his room and bed just before dawn. He'd never made love like that before. Sort of kinky, her biting his wrist, but more satisfying that any physical relationship he'd ever encountered. *Except for Deanna*, he reminded himself, remembering the special bond he shared with the Ship's Counselor. *Had shared*, he corrected, recalling the agreement they'd made to ignore the bond while serving together on the Enterprise. Imzadi--a sharing of mind, body, and soul. A wonderful gift a young Betazoid girl had shared with him on her home planet--a gift he'd thrown back in her face.

He swung his legs to the floor and looked at his wrist. *My God it's still bleeding*, he thought, not recalling her bite being that intense. In fact, it had been rather pleasant. He shook off the strange feeling and headed for the ultrasonic shower.

Back in uniform, he tapped the communications device on his right shoulder. "Report, Mr. Worf." In seconds the deep Klingon voice of the Enterprise's security officer filtered through the communicator.

"Wolf reporting in, Sir. The Revered One Vacar, his wife and party are ready to beam aboard the Enterprise."

"Good. I think we have a good chance of getting these people to join the Federation. Especially after the Captain works his charms on them tonight at the banquet."

A gruff snort was the only sound he received in reply; smiling, he signed off. Vatire, a class M planet in the west quadrant of the galaxy, had expressed an interest in the Federation, and the *Enterprise* had been dispatched to investigate. Riker and Worf had beamed down the day before to meet with the leaders and to make preliminary plans for a formal meeting aboard the *Enterprise*. Will remembered the expression the Captain had let slip when he'd ordered Riker and Worf to the planet. He'd wanted to go himself, but as Captain, he couldn't afford the risk. After all, they knew very little about these people. Riker wondered again if perhaps *that* was the reason he'd turned down the Captaincy so many times. He wanted to be in the thick of the excitement, not on the sidelines. Absently rubbing his now bandaged wrist, he exited his quarters to join Worf and the Vatirians.

* * *

"We're ready to beam up, sir," Riker said respectfully. He and Worf were in dress uniform, as would be the greeting crew in the transporter room. In seconds Riker, Worf and the Vatirians were surrounded by glittering light and then disappeared. They reappeared on the transporter pad to the accompaniment of all the pomp and circumstance reserved for important dignitaries.

"Revered One Vacar, let me introduce Captain Jean-Luc Picard." Picard took over from there.

"Revered One," he said, greeting the stately man with the traditional Vatirian salute--right hand raised with forefingers gracefully encircling thumb. Thanks to his android science officer Data, he'd been able to discover it in time. The Revered One looked pleased. His 6' 7" stature was a bit intimidating, even to a seasoned Starfleet officer like Picard. Vacar smiled down at him, his bluish-black eyes seeming to look into the Captain's soul and soothe all fears away. He removed the hood he wore, revealing shoulder-length black hair. Picard guessed him to be in his late twenties--very young to represent an entire planet. The planetary leader was dressed in an elegant, floor-length robe of black velvet trimmed with black brocade silk at the lapels. The woman at his side held his hand. She was strikingly beautiful, with long, black hair, and dressed in a long, flowing gown of red fire, the unusual glowing fabric caressing every curve of her very elegantly formed body. They looked as if they belonged together.

The Revered One turned to her and smiled warmly. "This is my...mate, Viccona. Their eyes held for long moments before the dignitary went on. He turned to the other couple behind them, similarly dressed but not as elaborately. They also held hands. "Vondor and Villanta, our servants and assistants." He smiled. "And call me Vacar. The Revered One sounds so...pompous, don't you think?"

There was a hint of mischief in his eyes which immediately put the Captain at ease. Picard nodded, returned the smile, and introduced Commander Data and Doctor Beverly Crusher. "Would you care for a tour of the ship?" the Captain asked.

"Very much so, Captain. Thank you for your hospitality." He turned to Riker and Worf. "If these two gentlemen represent what the rest of the Federation is like, I think we have made a wise decision."

Caught off guard by the compliment, Riker felt his face redden. "Thank you, sir." Worf merely nodded his head in acceptance.

"Mr. Worf, would you conduct the tour? Shall we meet afterward for refreshments, Vacar, or would you prefer to retire to your quarters?"

"No, I am quite eager to taste the delicacies you have on board ship. As you know, our world has only recently entered the space age. Being on a craft such as this is like...shall we say...a trip to a grand amusement park." He quickly added, "I mean no offense, Captain. It's just that we rarely get to see things of such power and beauty." He bowed humbly.

Picard almost visibly puffed up as Riker suppressed his laughter. The Revered One knew how to get to the Captain's heart -- compliment his ship. He thought over the words "a thing of power and beauty" -- yeah, that about summed up the *Enterprise*. She was one hell of a ship.

"Thank you Vacar," Picard said after allowing time to regain himself. "Lt. Worf will begin your tour now. Please, ask any questions you like and we'll meet you later in the rec room. Worf?"

"Yes, Sir. If you'll follow me, please."

After they were gone Picard turned to Will. "They seem friendly enough. What were they like on the planet?"

"Extraordinary, Captain. They are extremely close to their mates, almost as if they were telepathic, but when I asked the Revered One about it, he seemed reluctant to discuss it. I assumed it was too private a subject and let it go. But I've never seen a more loving race of people. So eager to please each other and visitors as well."

"Oh," Picard said, raising a sardonic eyebrow.

"The computer says that closeness is one of this society's strongest traits. They mate for life," Data stated, unaware of the *real* question being asked.

"Uh, I better check in with the bridge, sir. See you in the rec room."

"Whew, that was close," Will whispered to himself as he made a hasty retreat from the transporter room. Ship's Counselor Deanna Troi was coming down the corridor and she smiled at him. A flame burned inside him, an unquenchable thirst that must be satisfied. He advanced on her, grabbing her by the upper arms. All

reason left, only a desperate need--a need robbing his sanity--remained.

"Will, what's wrong?" She looked up at him with concern, but all he felt was need. His eyes were glowing red and then he was pressing her roughly to him. She screamed; he knew she was afraid, but all he could do was jerk at her clothes. She pushed against him, her terror only feeding his raw lust.

"Will, stop it. HELP!"

He crushed his mouth against hers and his lips slid down her throat. She felt something sharp and then her attacker was ripped from her.

Data held him secure, but still he fought to get to her. "Deanna, I *must* have you. I will die without you."

"Number One, control yourself." Picard's sharp, no-nonsense voice joined the chaos. The First Officer didn't seem to hear.

"I must have you. I *must!*" His eyes never left Deanna's.

"Data, take him to sickbay. Stay with him in the event he tries something else."

Data pulled him away, the tears on Riker's face stabbing at Deanna's control. She tried to pull her uniform together but it was useless. Picard handed her his jacket. "Thank you, sir." Her eyes refused to meet his and she felt her body begin to tremble.

"What happened, Counselor?"

"I'm...I'm not sure. He saw me and ran toward me. His eyes...his eyes were red, Captain. Then....then he started tearing at my clothes. I-I wasn't strong enough to fight him off. I've never seen Will like this. He was trying... Oh my God," she said as the realization struck. "He tried to rape me!" An arm slipped around her shoulder.

"Why don't we get you to your quarters. I'll have Beverly stop in to look at you later. It wouldn't be a good idea to go to...."

"I know," she whispered. "Captain..." She looked up at him. "One thing he said is true, or at least he thinks its true. If he doesn't...have me, he will die. What happened to him on that planet?"

"I don't know, but I plan to find out. Here are your quarters. Would you like me to assign someone to stay with you?"

She shook her head. "I'm okay now. I'm just worried about Will. Let me know when you find out anything, please?"

"Of course. Now rest. That's the best thing for you."

* * *

Picard headed straightway to sickbay. Upon entering he heard Riker's angry demand to be released and allowed to go to his "betrothed."

"His *what?*" Jean-Luc asked, a hard knot forming in the pit of his stomach. He didn't like this. Not one damned bit. "He's been like this ever since Data brought him down," Crusher explained, administering a sedative to the distraught man fighting his restraints. "But what scares me is his readings. He's becoming weaker. I can't explain it. Nothing showed up on the scan I just did. Except that the incisors on either side of his mouth have lengthened and sharpened. I've never seen anything like it. I'm preparing him for more tests."

Just then a hand reached out and gripped Beverly's wrist. "I need her," Riker pleaded. "Can't you see? I need her...*please!*" His eyes slowly closed as the sedative took effect, but a single tear slipped down his face and fell to the bed.

"Do what you can for him," Picard ordered. "Data, stay here. Dr. Crusher may need you." The Captain needed answers and he knew just where to get them.

* * *

Deanna tossed in her sleep, hearing over and over a pleading voice begging her to come. Will's voice. She'd gone over the assault numerous times. Will had been insistent, but there was no anger involved--just an overpowering need. But for

what? She sensed it was more than just her body--his voice was alluring, tempting, making her want to go to him, relieve the torment torturing his body and soul. And hers.

After dressing, she slipped out into the corridor and quietly made her way to sickbay. *Why am I being so secretive?* she wondered, but deep inside she knew the necessity of it.

When she reached sickbay she checked to see where Beverly and the rest of the staff were. Beverly had returned to her quarters--it was way past midnight. Dr. Xenia was in the outer office and Data was busy at the computer console beside the Canaxian female. She spotted Will and her heart clutched painfully. He was asleep, or knocked out, with bound hands and feet. She moved silently to his bed and began to loosen the straps. *What am I doing?* she asked, but somehow she knew. She and Riker were destined for something wonderful and no longer was she afraid.

Will's eyes opened, widening when they took in who it was. He started to speak, but a finger to his lips silenced him. "Not now," Deanna whispered. "In my cabin." She helped him stand, and with an arm about his back and his arm around her shoulder, they made their escape.

Inside the secured room, Deanna eased Riker onto her bed; he took her in his arms and held her close. "You came," he cried, showering her face with kisses.

"How could I not?" She pulled back and smiled up at him. "I don't know what's going on, but I know *you*. And you would never hurt me, Will. Of that I am sure."

He was gentler with her this time but she still sensed his urgency. She allowed him to undress her and to carry her to the bed. There he quickly shed his own clothing. He drew her against the length of his body, massaging, caressing each curve, each crevice. He kissed her again, causing the flame within her to rise to meet his. His mouth drifted to her neck and his tongue pressed against her pulse point. The sensation was like no other she'd ever experienced. A sharp *prick* dug into her neck and her body exploded into psychedelic sensations. Will was sucking at her neck and every inch of her body, her very mind, reached out for him. She felt herself grow faint but didn't care--she just wanted this to go on and on forever.

* * *

"I want to know what happened to my First Officer on your planet," Picard demanded, trying to maintain a semblance of decorum but finding it difficult.

Vacar looked unshaken. "I don't know what you mean, Captain. As you could see, he was fine when we, uh...what do you call it, ah yes, beamed aboard your ship. What seems to be the problem?"

"The *problem* is that he attacked a female crew member, our ship's Counselor. He nearly raped her in the hallway. I assure you that is not common behavior for Commander Riker. Also, he's growing weak. We've restrained him in sickbay, but Dr. Crusher says he's getting weaker. He keeps asking for Troi, the woman he attacked. Pleading for her is more like it."

The Vacar and his wife exchanged worried looks. "Has he changed in any physical way?" Viccona asked.

"Two teeth, one on either side of his mouth, have elongated and become sharp."

Viccona's delicate hand flew to her mouth. "Oh Vacar, how could this have happened?"

Vacar took his wife's hand and seated her. "I'll find out, my life. I promise you."

"What's she talking about?" Picard demanded. "What's happened to Riker?"

"Why don't we sit down, Captain; this may take some time to explain."

An hour and a half passed. "You mean your entire population is made up of..."

"I think your culture would call us vampires, Captain, although I assure you we bear very little resemblance to the folklore of your ancestors. You see, we studied Earth's culture in particular, since they seem to have so much influence in

the Federation.

"We don't sleep in coffins, Captain," Viccona assured him, and we only drink from our blood mates. And after the initial bonding, only small amounts are taken, which our systems replace quite rapidly. And, as I'm sure you've already deduced, sunlight doesn't bother us, although we do refrain from being in it as much as possible. Our eyes are quite sensitive to it.

"And we are not immortal, although we do have an expanded life span. I'm 1,125 years old and Viccona is 719. We can expect to live at least 5000 years. Unless, of course, we're killed, which is another feature we do not share with the fictitious vampires on your world."

Picard rubbed the back of his neck, trying to absorb it all. "Then if you only...sample the blood of your mate, what happened to Will?" A shrill sound broke their conversation; Picard tapped his communicator. "It's from Vatire."

"Ah, maybe we'll have our answer in a second." Vacar listened intently, then shook his head as if sad and shut off the connection. "We have the person responsible." He turned to Viccona. "It was Vinnia." Tears came to Viccona's eyes, and Picard was shocked to see they appeared as blood.

"Who's Vinnia?" Picard wanted answers--he had no time for sympathy.

"Vinnia is my wife's sister," Vacar said. "Her blood mate died in a freak accident several months ago. You see, Captain, when we take a blood mate, we are connected not only in body but in mind as well. We read each others thoughts. For us, having children is the fulfillment of our bond. Vinnia never had children. When Vultros died, she lost her mind. We thought she was doing better but obviously this was not the case. She thought she'd failed him because their union was unfruitful. She came to your Commander Riker in his quarters in the palace and initiated him into our kind by taking some of his blood. She bit his wrist instead of his neck because it is forbidden for an un-mated woman to draw blood from a male's throat. She hoped to be back in Riker's room before he left so she would be the first female he saw upon awakening in his new state. You see, the first woman a man sees, regardless of who she is, is the one he craves. He cannot help himself. We must be very careful to keep Riker and this other officer apart. He won't be responsible and may drain her completely. Our joinings are hidden in ritual and mystery. It is a very private thing attended only by the wedding couple and the Goodar--the male who protects the bride. It is absolutely necessary that another be present to prevent the death of the female. Surely Vinnia was working with someone--no female would ever risk a bonding without others to protect her. But she miscalculated. It is not Riker's fault, Picard. He has lost control." Vacar bowed deeply. "This is very unfortunate. I apologize on behalf of my people."

"That doesn't help my officer very much," Picard said bitterly. He should be diplomatic about the whole thing, he supposed, but damn it to hell, Will was a vampire!

"Do not worry, Captain," Viccona said. "Unless there is a consummation--a drawing of blood from the female and an act of sex between them, the process can be reversed. Our scientists developed a serum to protect us against just such unfortunate incidents as this."

"Can we get some on board immediately?" Picard was worried--not only about Riker's condition but also about the emotional bond that he and Counselor Troi already shared. Would it be their undoing?

"Certainly. I'll contact our medical foundation at once."

Picard tapped his chest. "Dr. Crusher, report to Vacar's quarters at once."

A few minutes later an anxious voice proceeded Beverly Crusher's body into the room. "He's gone, Captain. Will's not in the sick bay!"

* * *

Deanna felt the life leaving her body but didn't care. All that mattered was she was in Will's arms. His mouth was still at her throat and she willingly lay

back and let him take what he wanted. Just as darkness started to settle over her, she heard a commotion outside her door; then everything went black.

* * *

Will looked at Deanna lying so still on the sickbay bed. "How could I *do* something like this? What came over me?"

Picard laid a hand on his shoulder. "Beverly says she's going to be alright. It won't your fault, Will. The Vat..."

"Yes, I know," he said bitterly. "I couldn't control myself. Well, I don't accept that, Captain. I'm a man--not a damned...vampire--or whatever it is they call themselves. I have a mind--I should have been able to stop myself." Haunted eyes looked up at Picard. "I would have killed her if you and Worf hadn't come when you did." He dropped his head into his hands.

"Will, listen to me," Picard spoke, the authority there dampened with concern. He could not eradicate from this mind the image of Will rising from Deanna's body, his mouth dripping with her blood, eyes flaming red. "Deanna will be alright. She's getting a blood transfusion right now and she should be able to talk with us later today. Why don't you go back to your quarters, and I promise you'll be called the minute she awakens."

"Why?" Riker said, his voice breaking. "So I can finish the job?"

"Enough, Number One." In Will's condition he would listen to nothing but a firm military voice. Or so Picard hoped. Slowly the dark head raised and the dampened corners of Will's eyes cut to Picard's heart. He forced his captain's tone to continue. "Out of here, Commander. That's an order." Will looked ready to object, but suddenly all the fight left him. His shoulders sagging instead of erect as they usually were, he left sickbay. Picard hit his intercom button. "Mr. Data," he said when his science officer answered, "Commander Riker is going to his quarters."

"Yes, sir?"

"Just be close by. Don't let him see you."

"Understood, Captain."

Picard stared at his Counselor for a few minutes. According to Vacar, she and Riker would now be linked--blood mates he'd called it. What exactly that meant Picard didn't know, but he had a bad feeling about it. Very bad indeed. "Let me know when she awakens, Doctor."

* * *

Deanna's eyes fluttered open and she looked into the worried face of her friend, Dr. Beverly Crusher. She tried to sit but fell back, too weak to rise. "W-What happened?" She paused. "Will. I have to see Will. Please, Beverly. Bring Will to me."

"Shhh, the doctor soothed. "Will and the Captain are on their way. You scared us, my friend. You've been unconscious for nearly two days."

"H-How is he? He doesn't blame himself does he?"

"Just a little."

"He mustn't. I understand now, Beverly. When we were together I could read his thoughts...not just sense his emotions, but really read his thoughts. I knew what was going through his mind, the pressure being exerted on him. I have to see him." She tried to sit up again but Beverly pushed her back. "Let me go to him, please! He needs me."

"I'm here, Imzadi." Will stood in the doorway looking at her with such love that Beverly felt as if she were a voyeur. Will stepped closer and took a seat beside her bed. He picked up her hand and kissed her wrist, right at the pulse point.

Tears came to Deanna's eyes at the old endearment and Beverly started at the redness of the droplets. She slipped out without a word.

"God, I almost killed you," Riker said, looking away. "I couldn't live with myself if I ever hurt you. You know that don't you?"

"I know everything about you, Will Riker. Your mind, your body..." She paused and continued seductively, "Your blood belongs to me."

His smile was sunshine covering his face. "I don't know what's happening to us," Will said, lightly stroking Deanna's arm from shoulder to fingertip, "but I don't want it to ever end. I can feel your thoughts, your emotions. I know you don't blame me. God, when we made love it was better than it ever was before."

She caressed his face. "I know."

"But you're a telepath."

She captured his hand and brought it up to her lips. "I can only sense people's moods, their emotions. Will, I can hear you talk inside my head. The...way we used to on Betazoid before..."

"Before I left. I know, Deanna."

"We'll always be linked, Will, you know that, but I've been able to block your thoughts from my mind. I...I can't do that now." She lowered her eyes. "I don't want to," came a soft whisper.

"It's alright, Deanna." He lifted her face. "I don't want you to. Not ever. What we share now is so deep, so moving...I don't think I could live without it."

"But what about our careers? Everything we've worked for?"

"It doesn't matter. All that matters is us."

She looked away.

"Don't you believe me?" Riker asked.

"This blood thing," she said, deliberately changing the subject. "What does it mean? Even now I feel my body craving your blood. And my teeth--they're changing, aren't they? It frightens me a little. Do...do you think I will drink blood as well? And if I do, will I...lose control...?"

"Like I did? No. Vacar explained the whole thing to me. It's only the initial drawing by the male. After that it's only in small amounts and he assures me we'll be safe. Don't worry; everything is going to work out."

She thought she ought to argue but she was so tired. Her eyes felt like lead weights. A warm, moist kiss pressed against her temple.

"Sleep well, Imzadi," he whispered against her neck. "I'll see you later."

Riker went directly to the bridge after leaving sickbay but he couldn't concentrate on what he was doing. Thankfully, nothing of major importance was going on at the moment. He felt Picard studying him and shifted in his seat. Deanna was all that filled his mind. Nothing else mattered--not the ship, not the crew; only she mattered. Vacar told him the desire would be strongest at the beginning, but it would never completely go away. Deanna would be the central most important thing in his life. The way he was now he would be of little or no use to the Captain in an emergency. In truth, he admitted to himself, he would be a hindrance. But he couldn't give her up; he couldn't live without what they now shared. His eyes darted to the turbolift door, his control weakening. He had to be by her side--to be sure she was safe.

"Number One, why don't you sit out the rest of this shift?"

Will started to object, but Picard put in too quickly. "Dr. Crusher says you need rest. You haven't completely recovered from your...ordeal."

"I'm fine, Captain," he said harsher than intended. "I'm perfectly capable of doing my job."

"No one said you weren't, Will." Picard spoke softly, motioning him to the ready room just off the main bridge. "Mr. Data, you have command."

"Will, this isn't going to work," Picard said when they were safely out of earshot.

"What isn't going to work."

"Don't play games with me, Commander. You know damned well what I'm talking about. I may not be an empath like Counselor Troi, but even I can tell your mind is not on the bridge where it belongs." His voice softened. "Will, you can't function as a Starfleet officer this way."

Nervous, Will ran his hand across his face, pulling down on his beard. "Vicar said it would get better."

"But it won't completely go away. I heard him too, Will; I was there. A Starfleet officer has to be ready to handle any situation at any time. What happens if I have to send Troi into a dangerous situation? Will you be able to handle it? Or what if something happened to me and you were in command? Could you order her to do something that might endanger her life?"

The thought of Deanna in danger caused his heart to race. He felt perspiration on his forehead.

"You can't even talk about it, let alone deal with it," Picard said firmly. "Go get some rest, Will. We'll talk later."

* * *

Two days later Deanna was released from sickbay. That night in Will's quarters she drank of his blood. "I've never experienced anything like this," she murmured sluggishly.

"I told you it would be okay, didn't I?"

She sat up in the bed where they'd just made love. "It's wonderful but..."

"But what?"

"Will, you've just lost your command."

"No, no," he said in a soothing tone. "It's just temporary--until my control comes back."

"What if it doesn't? Will, we already had a bond before this happened. Who's to say our desire and our fear for each other will diminish?"

He drew her to him, letting her body press against the length of his. "It'll happen, Deanna. It has to. Now come here and let me show you how much I need you."

* * *

"This is a most extraordinary gesture, Captain," Vicar said, commenting on the elaborate preparations for the banquet. The gala event, at the insistence of The Revered One, had been put off until Troi was able to attend.

"Thank you, sir. I hope the food is to your liking."

"They're all my favorites, Captain. You've been talking to Vicconna. Is this how you get every new planet to join the Federation?" His smile was sincere.

"Only those whose leaders' wives are willing to share state secrets." He returned the smile. He spotted his First Officer and Counselor dancing among the crew members. They looked happy but Picard noted a strain on both their faces. He hated keeping Will from the bridge, but until he was certain Riker could act in the best interests of the ship and not to protect Deanna Troi, he had no choice. Will had been helping Geordi in Engineering. Not a suitable place for a man of his rank and command experience, but at the present, the only place Picard could think to put him. He hated his thoughts--it made Will sound like a damned piece of furniture instead of the fine First Officer he was. *Or used to be,* Picard thought miserably.

* * *

"Are you having a good time?" Will swung Deanna around the holodeck dance floor.

"Are you? You seem a little distant this evening."

"I'm sorry. I have a headache, that's all. Makes it hard for me to think."

She tried to keep the worry from her voice. All she seemed to do lately was worry about Will and drink his blood. Not a combination that pleased her--at least not the worrying part. "Maybe you'd better let Beverly look you over."

"I said I was fine," he snapped. At her sudden intake of breath he pulled her

closer. "Damn, I'm sorry. I'm... I'm just tired, that's all."

"Let's sit this one out." She guided him toward a chair but he collapsed before she could reach it. Worf was there in a second, kneeling by Riker's side.

"What happened?" he demanded, worry evident in his gruff tone.

"He just collapsed. He said something about a headache and being tired, then he just passed out." She heard the words but they sounded as if they were coming from someone else's lips.

Beverly Crusher was beside her then and she heard the soft hum of the doctor's medical scanner. "Is he alright, Doctor?" She recognized Picard's voice but couldn't look up at him. She couldn't take her eyes from Will's face. *Hang on, Will. Please don't die!*

"Let's get him to sickbay. I need to run some more tests on him." Beverly was speaking again.

"Do you have any idea what it might be, Doctor?" Picard demanded.

"I'd rather not say at this point. Everyone please clear out of the way so the medics can get through."

* * *

"It's Deanna's blood," Crusher announced an hour later. "He's having an allergic reaction to it."

"No," Deanna whispered, reaching out to grasp Will's hand. "It can't be that. We can't survive without each other's blood!"

"Will can't survive *with* it, Deanna," Crusher said sternly. "I can't be sure until I do some further tests, but I'm fairly certain he'll die if he continues to drink from you."

"I've done this to you," Deanna cried, talking to the unconscious man whose hand she clung to for support. "I've already destroyed your career and now I'm killing you." She turned haunted eyes to the Captain. "Isn't there *anything* you can do?"

Picard placed one hand over the two of theirs, and with the other hit his communicator. "Picard to Engineering."

"Geordi here, sir."

"Do you have earlier DNA patterns on file for Commander Riker and Counselor Troi?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. You and Data work out a way to beam Counselor Troi and the Commander down to the planet, and then return them using their old DNA readings instead of their present ones. Can it be done?"

"Yes, sir. We've done it before. But it will take time to set up."

"How long?"

"Two hours minimum."

"Make it one. Picard out."

"But Captain," Vicar said, "You will destroy their bond. Isn't there anything else that can be done?"

"I'm open to suggestions..."

Vicar was silent.

"Then we proceed as soon as Geordi and Data are ready."

* * *

"No," Riker said. "It's not true. I can't be allergic to your blood. It's what makes us so close." He swung his legs off the sickbay bed and stared deeply into Deanna's eyes. "I won't do it. I won't lose what we have together."

Deanna pulled away and turned her back to him. "Do you think this is what *I* want? We have no choice. I'll lose you one way or the other. Will, I can't be the instrument of your death."

"Beverly can find something to combat it. There has to be a way!" He turned

her around to face him and saw the red droplets of moisture on her cheeks. Gently he ran his index finger along her face and brought the sweet nectar to his lips. Deanna reached to stop him but couldn't. "Will, my blood is deadly to you. Don't you understand?"

He drew her close, laying his face against her bosom. "We don't have any choice, do we?"

"Not that I can see."

"When will it happen?"

"Geordi says it's ready now. They just gave me enough time to explain it to you. We're supposed to report to the transporter room now." Her voice broke. "Oh Will, I don't know if I can let you go!"

"Yes, you can. You're strong, Deanna. You'll... We'll *both* do what we have to do."

She nodded. "It won't be the same. We won't be blood mates." She cried then and he held her, wanting to keep her in the protective circle of his arms for eternity. Or at least for the next 5000 years.

* * *

Riker and Deanna held hands as Geordi worked the transporter beam. Picard was by his side. Also in attendance were Vicar and Viccona.

Riker squeezed Deanna's hand tight as the beam caught them. They materialized on Vatire. For a few moments neither said a word.

"It's beautiful. Almost like a garden."

"Made for lovers," Will whispered. "Are you ready?"

She nodded and Riker signaled Geordi to beam them aboard.

She touched his face, taking a droplet of blood from his face to her lips. "We don't need a love potion to make us care for each other." She kissed him lightly on the lips. "I'll always love you. Don't forget that."

Before Riker could reply, the simmering light enveloped them and they reappeared on the transporter pad.

They stood for a second, trying to gather their thoughts. The intense desire was gone. The blood link no longer bonded them. Riker turned to the others. "It worked." His words were flat and sad. "Could we be alone for a few minutes?"

Quietly the onlookers filed from the room. "Are you okay?" Riker asked.

Deanna nodded. *How can I ever be fine again?* she thought. *How can I live without our bond?*

Riker's face lit up with surprise. He'd heard her--inside his head. *He'd heard her! Deanna?*

"Will," she spoke aloud now. "It's not what you think. It's the bond we shared on Betazoid. I--I was too weak to block my thoughts. Forgive me."

"It's okay." Riker's emotions were churning. Had he made a mistake turning his back on the Imzadi bond he and Deanna shared? "I feel so empty," he said softly, echoing the intense loneliness he felt. It was like death...only worse. In death there was no pain.

"Yes, but now our lives can go back to the way they were before. I can block the Betazoid bond and everything will be..."

He spun her around. "Deanna, I don't *want* everything to go back the way it was. This blood bond made me realize what a precious thing I'd given up. I love you, Deanna. You're the most important person in my life. Don't you know that?"

"No, it's just the aftereffects of the blood bonding. I can't ruin your life, Will. I'm just someone who used to mean something to you. It was your decision for us to break the Imzadi bond. It took a long time for me to get over your denying what we shared, but I accepted it. Will, I won't stand in the way of your success." Tears pooled in her black eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

Riker captured one with his fingertip. "Deanna, I was wrong to deny our bond. I--I can't promise you everything will be smooth and easy for us, but I want to give our relationship another try. Can you forgive me?"

"What about your career?"

"What about it? Other officers have personal lives and careers too." He grinned. "I think I've matured a little since you first met me."

Her eyes glistened but there was doubt in them. "Are you sure? I can't lose you a second time."

He drew her into his arms. *I'm sure.*

She melted against him, leaning on his strength. *Welcome home, Imzadi. I love you, too.*

- The End -

[Ann Leonhart may be new to vampire writing but certainly not to fan fiction. She edited (Regina Marracino co-edited) two media zines entitled "Who Rides For Justice." In addition, she has written a Simon and Simon novel entitled, "Fate's Final Irony," and published a 400+ page media zine called Rough N Ready, of which she has written many of the stories. She has also been published in other zines. At the present time, she is working on a professional novel, but as a break will write fan fiction simply because she loves it. As secretary to the Director of the Writing Program at the University of Kentucky, she is surrounded by writers, and she is taking creative writing courses. She hopes to write more vampire stories, especially since she was introduced to so many fascinating characters in the first issue of Good Guys....

YUCK! GREEN BLOOD

by

Susan L. Rock

The voluptuous blonde stood at her window, a petulant expression on her face. Instead of what one might normally expect to see out of a window, this one showed only a peculiar flame colored mist, swirling endlessly in a pattern that was no pattern. She was bored.

Suddenly the phone rang. She sprang to answer it. ***At last, something is happening!*** *she thought exultantly.*

"Angelique here." She had long since stopped smiling at the irony of the name her parents had given her at birth.

A rumble came from the the receiver.

Angelique's expression became a mask of rage. Her voice became a hiss of fury. "What do you mean, she's found somebody! I thought He..." Her voice made the word sound like a curse. "...did not allow such things to happen to his faithful followers!"

The receiver muttered again.

"I see. The girl was not discovered in time, and SHE just slipped in. I have heard of such things before. But if she's on the loose, then I'd better go keep an eye on her. Immediately, or we could lose the best tool I ever fashioned. Find a body for me to possess for a while. And ask the Boss for a leave of absence for me, will you?"

The receiver squawked. Loudly and indignantly.

After a few more minutes of conversation, she hung up the phone, an evil smile on her face.

* * *

CAPTAIN'S PERSONAL LOG - STARDATE 8123.1:

We have arrived at Starbase 12 for supplies and personnel transfers from various ships. As usual, most of the replacement people we have requested, we have not been granted, and of those people we have acquired, several have missed the rendezvous ship due to other Starfleet missions, or other inopportune happenings. Of the seven replacement personnel requested, we have transferred aboard only one: Josette Collins, Ensign, Security. We have also transferred aboard Dr. Angelique Dubois, a specialist in viruses. She will be with us only a few weeks, until she can transfer to the U.S.S. Antares on her way to her new position as at the Viral Institute on Earth Colony Four.

Due overcrowded conditions, I have given orders that these two shall be quartered in the same cabin, since that is the only one fully empty just now, rather than moving our more established crewpeople around.

As Captain Kirk was dictating the log, he was feeling very pleased. Dr. DeMontaine was both beautiful, and giving the impression that she was interested. She could certainly liven up any mission, much less one as boring as this one was promising to be.

Contemplating the acutely dull mission fate had handed to him, gathering spectral data on a completely uninhabited star system, had almost put Kirk to sleep when the second shift Communications Officer broke into his reverie.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here."

"Captain, I'm picking up an automatic distress call from a ship called the *SS Austrand*. The signal is on a frequency that went out of style over a hundred years ago, and the registry of ships doesn't show any ships by that name. I don't know what to do, but if that signal's authentic, it's got to date from right around the time of the Eugenics Wars."

"Can you trace the signal back to it's point of origin?"

"I think so, sir. It seems to be coming from behind Aurigae II."

"It will take over a full day to reach, but it IS within the system that we are supposed to be investigating," the Captain mused aloud. "Instruct Navigation to plot and lay in a course to intercept. We're supposed to be investigating, so we'll go find out how this ship got as far from Earth as it did." A task much more to Kirk's taste than the analysis of star construction! "Let me know when we're within two hours ETA at this ship, if it still is one. And ask Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Ms. Cho to join me at 0800 Hours tomorrow to pool whatever knowledge we can find in the archives about this *SS Austrand*. Kirk out."

* * *

At 0800 Hours, all the requested personnel were in Briefing Room #2. Ms. Cho, Ship's Historian, was the first to speak.

"I did find some indication of the name, *SS Austrand*, in the records. However, it was not where I had expected to find it." She took a deep breath and continued. "The name was mentioned in the copies of the log tapes we took from the *SS Botany Bay* as a sister ship."

Kirk looked at Spock & McCoy, remembering THAT ship all too well. "Are you saying, Ms. Cho, that we're probably going to run into ANOTHER bunch of Colonel Green's Master Race? Another group like Khan & Company?"

McCoy was appalled. "I'd rather be back with the Viaans than dealing with that crowd!"

Spock calmly proceeded to point out that they need not revive anyone. "Providing, of course, that anyone on such an old vessel is still alive."

But, when they came within sensor range, there was absolutely NO sign of life detectable, not even the faint ones of people in suspended animation.

Feeling a little less unhappy about the whole situation, and a LOT more curious, since there was no sign of damage to the ship's hull, Kirk decided to have a team investigate. "Ms. Cho for Historical, Ensign Collins, Lieutenant Morgant, & Mr. Freeon for Security, and Mr. Checkov for Command. Checkov, you're in charge. I realize that this team is heavy on Security personnel, but I'm taking no chances. If there is anyone alive on that ship, he or she is to be considered armed and dangerous. And see who Bones recommends for Medical personnel."

"Yes, Keptin!" Checkov was proud of the fact that he was getting to lead, for a change. Of course, it might be hazardous...but he was armed, both with knowledge of the probable foe, and with a fully charged phaser set on heavy stun.

"Energize!"

Soon six people in pressure suits were standing on the bridge of the *SS Austrand*. It looked like an explosion in a laundry. There were articles of clothing all over the bridge, log tapes, which were picked up for later analysis, but absolutely no bodies anywhere to be seen.

"Anytink detectable, Dr. DeMontaine?" All those empty shirts & things were

making Checkov a little nervous. True, the Captain would be easy to contact, but...

"Just that the dust on the floor," Angelique's tricorder was whirring as she spoke, "has all the chemicals found in the normal human body, except for water."

Lieutenant Morgant spoke up. "Are you saying that all the people here somehow decomposed, bones and all, but their clothing didn't? That's...weird!"

Angelique was grinning, as though at a private joke. She had had to insist to the good doctor that she be the one to go. "Perhaps they got too close to the sun."

"What does the sun have to do with it?!?" Morgant was not noted for his patience.

Angelique was still grinning. "Maybe nothing. I was just making a little joke." And she grinned, looking at the transparent aluminum window that was one wall of the bridge.

"I don't think that's funny at all," griped Morgant, but said no more.

As they went through the tiny ship, the situation was the same. There were piles of clothing everywhere and dust swirled around their feet at every step, but there were no corpses at all.

Finally they came to the hold.

As they stepped in, Ensign Collins noted, a little timidly, "This seems to be the only room on the ship with no windows."

It was also the only room with a body in it. Checkov was beginning to feel almost relieved. At least something about this ship was normal!

The figure lay slumped, a paintbrush in one wizened claw, near a great black torpedo tube. It appeared that he had been trying to paint something on it. The message read "DANGER! DO NOT OPEN! VA... " and then a scrawl down the side to the brush in the man's hand.

All six of them stared at the gruesome sight. Then Checkov, recalling himself to the business at hand, opened the communicator and reported in to his Captain. Meanwhile the rest of the team went investigating the boxes in the hold, scrupulously leaving the black tube alone.

Angelique, having finished her exploration, came back to the remains of the man, running her tricorder over him. Finally, she nodded to herself as if satisfied. "This one's not tainted," she muttered under her breath. "Probably just as well, considering..." Then she rolled the corpse over to get a better look, and a crude cross, two sticks tied together, came into sight from underneath it. Strangely, the bottom of the cross came to a sharp point. She froze, a hiss coming from her throat, as she slowly backed away about three paces.

Then, while everyone else was preoccupied with other activities, she cranked her phaser to disintegrate & blasted the cross into powder. Satisfied, she pocketed the weapon before anyone else had turned around.

Then she patted the tube, much as a person might pat a faithful dog.

* * *

Some time later, they had taken the little ship into one of the largest cargo holds for transportation back to Earth. It just fit, Scotty said, "But I wouldna try to get inta that hold wi'out a transporter. T'is scrapin' the sides as it is."

"But can you compensate for the weight of it?" asked Kirk.

"Aye. Any word on those log tapes? I'd like to know what disintegrated her crew, that I would. We thoroughly decontaminated our people afore they set foot back on the ship. We even took the precaution of floodin' the hold with an inert gas so their ship's atmosphere wouldna leak over to the Enterprise ventilation system, but even so..."

"No, not yet. Spock & Uhura are working on it right now, but nobody's used the old videocassette method for centuries, and they're having to jury-rig a player."

"Ah think Ah'll give 'em a hand. Where're they working?"

"Engineering Bay 3."

"With your permission, Captain?"

"Sure, Scotty. Go ahead. I'd kind of like to know myself."

* * *

Late that ship's night, when the crew was mostly asleep except for the third shift, a figure slipped into the short range transporter room. Little utilized, it was primarily used as a way of clearing the ship in emergency situations. When she felt sure she was undetected, Angelique set the controls to transport something from one cargo bay to another, energized, and then proceeded to wipe the record of the transaction. As she worked, she muttered to herself "I do hope I'm doing this right. I should have taken that computer technician instead, but who wants to get stuck with a name like Bertha Zwinge if they have any other choice? Besides which, this body looks kind of like me and it has my first name."

Finally, satisfied she had covered her tracks, she made her way to Cargo Hold #3. There, in the middle of the floor, lay the large black tube with red lettering from the *SS Austrand*. Carefully, she laid out the supplies she had brought with her, drawing a circle around the tube, and another one around herself. Then she filled both with symbols, stood up, and began her spell. After almost half an hour of chanting and invocations, the top of the tube slowly opened, and out slid a large ebony wood box, with ornate brass decorations. On top of it was another cross of two wooden sticks lashed together. She chuckled to herself. *Obviously, he didn't pick a very devout bunch. That looks like it was once two legs of a chair.* This cross went the same way as the one on the *Austrand*. Then, cranking the phaser back to heavy stun, she sprinted over to the coffin, opened the lid, and fired. Dropping the note she had written earlier into the interior, she closed the coffin lid. Using antigrav equipment, she soon had the large box hidden from the casual, or even the not so casual glance. Cleaning up the floor, she shut the torpedo tube, went back to the transporter, and transported it back over, again wiping the memory of the transporter log. Finally, she went back to her cabin.

Josette stirred as she came in. "Angie?" she queried sleepily. "What were you doing up at this hour?"

Angelique smiled. Fortunately for Josette's peace of mind, it was too dark in the room to see anything. "Oh, I had a meeting with my old lover, of course."

Josette snorted. "Angie, I do wish you'd stop kidding. We've only been on this ship for two weeks and you said when we first boarded that you didn't know anyone here yet."

"Of course. I'm such a kidder. Goodnight, Josie."

"Night." And Josette went back to sleep.

* * *

In Cargo Bay 3, something strange was happening. The lid of the box was rising, propelled by a hand wearing a large obsidian signet ring, set in gold. As the lid rose higher, one could see the figure inside the large black coffin. A man, about 5 feet tall (although he probably would have seemed taller if he wasn't bent nearly double with age), stepped from the coffin. His hair was white, his skin was a mass of wrinkles, and he leaned heavily on the wolfs-head cane in his left hand. He was dressed in an Inverness cape in a dark grey wool tweed. As he moved, he saw the note which had been left with him. Too hungry to think, he grabbed it, putting it in the inner pocket of his cape, and went in search of sustenance.

Outside the door, he met up with Lieutenant Morgant, who was taking his nightly jog through some of the less traveled areas of the ship. Seeing this strangely dressed intruder appear from the storeroom, he called out. "What are you doing in this area? This section is restricted to security personnel only."

Hearing the voice, the old man turned and faced the Lieutenant. For one moment, the dark eyes were sad, then they blazed with an unholy thirst that left the Lieutenant reaching for his phaser.

"I don't know who you are, Mister, and it doesn't matter. You're in a restricted..." Morgant's voice trailed off as the man's eyes seemed to enlarge until there was nothing else. Dropping the phaser, he slowly took a step closer to

the strangely dressed man, whose mouth opened, then closed on Morgant's throat.

About five minutes later, the man raised his head, easing Morgant's limp body down to the floor. The dark eyes, had anyone been looking, showed a grief so great as to be agony. "So," the man said aloud, "it begins again." He was already more youthful looking. "Where will it end this time? Must I remain in this accursed state until the universe ends?" Looking sadly at the body on the floor, he continued, "I WILL not make the same mistake twice. I must give you the true death, before you rise and in your initial hunger spread the curse to THIS ship as the *Austrand* was infected by the one who found and freed me from Angelique's last trap. Forgive me," he said, reaching for the prone form. But instead, hearing the sounds of someone coming, he turned and fled, cursing.

* * *

The next morning, McCoy was eating breakfast with Captain Kirk, and sounding off about Morgant, who had been brought in to Sickbay the night before.

"Jim, I swear, I've never seen anything like it in my whole medical career! The man was hale and hearty yesterday, and this morning he's lying down in Sickbay with his circulation and brain the only things functioning!"

"But he's alive?"

"If you can call it that. We've been trying to get a blood sample, but somehow, metal has no effect on him. I'm going to try a laser scalpel and a pipette next."

"Any ideas, Doctor? How about the analysis of that corpse from the *Austrand*? Anything in common there?"

"Not that I can tell. Maybe once we get the log tapes translated..." McCoy shrugged, but his face looked worried.

"Well, Spock says he'll have a translation for us by 1200."

"Let me know. I could use a clue to this thing."

"Will do, Bones."

And Kirk went off to tend his ship.

* * *

Meanwhile, back in Cargo Bay 3, a man, dressed exactly the same as the figure from the coffin had been, but with dark, curly brown hair and pale, smooth skin, sat down on one of the crates to read the note from Angelique. From the look of him, you would think he was about thirty years old.

Dear Barnabas,

Welcome back into circulation! To give you a few guidelines, this is the year 2335, (although they don't keep the calendar that way anymore. They'd say Stardate 8125), and you are on board the Starship **Enterprise,** *of StarFleet, commanded by James T. Kirk. The ruling body is the United Federation of Planets, (with several different types of creatures, including human beings, running the show). You are so far from Earth it would take several months to get there at the current top speed, and I am here to claim you for my master. That's really all you need to know.*

I'll see you soon, my beloved husband-in-spirit.

Angelique

The man spoke, as though Angelique could hear him. "First of all, any marriage was only in your demented brain. Secondly, I've been fighting you for, IF that note is correct, over 500 years. What gives you the idea that I'll cooperate now?"

* * *

At 1200 Hours, there was another meeting in Briefing Room Two, to watch the log tapes of the *Austrand*. The first tape held a log recap (there had been 40

people on board the ship), a cargo manifest, and a statement of the mission of the crew:

> We, the true future of the human race, do hereby swear that we shall find a new world, and upon it, we shall thrive and conquer. When we have grown strong in numbers, we shall return to the world which rejected us and take it over, giving our children their rightful heritage once more."

McCoy snorted. "Modest bunch, weren't they?"

But as the tapes went on, the arrogance disappeared. The Captain began making reports of illnesses on board; "It is to be hoped that it is not an epidemic" were his exact words. But his medical staff could not seem to pinpoint anything. The patients had no prior symptoms, but became progressively weaker and more anemic as time went on. "The only thing that all cases have in common is two small wounds on the neck, over the jugular vein...resembling pinpricks, or possibly needle marks," the Captain's log reported.

Hearing this, McCoy went pale.

Spock stopped the tape for a moment. "Doctor McCoy, are you well?"

McCoy took a deep breath and replied, "I'm fine. However, that reminds me of something I haven't mentioned. We had a case in Sickbay last night of a man in a coma like no coma I ever saw. Had it been fifty or a hundred years ago, he would have been declared dead...and he just woke up. He had such marks on his throat when brought in." His thoughts were racing like the engines at warp 10. *If we've got a virus aboard that wiped out forty supermen, it's possible it could be some kind of bacteriological weapon from the Eugenics Wars, formulated to have no cure.* Then he caught himself. *Easy, Leonard. As Spock would no doubt say, "You're speculating, Doctor." Let's see what other facts this tape can give out.*

As the tape went on, things only got worse. There were reports of people pronounced dead, only to revive some hours later. The crew members who had revived started attacking only those who had not been attacked before. "Weapons do not stop them. And either I am as insane as my crew has become, or all the scientific knowledge that has sustained our crew and our mission up to now is based on a lie." The final log entry went like this:

> Captain's Log -
>
> I have discovered what our illness is. One of the supply boxes in the hold contained it, and it sneaked on board without anyone seeing through it's disguise. I am not insane, as I had thought at first. There ARE such things as vampires!"

The Enterprise crew looked at each other. "Opinions, gentlemen?" Kirk queried.

McCoy spoke up. "Captain, I would say that the man was raving. The tape did say that the crew attacked each other at one stage. They must have been delirious."

"And you believe that the later tapes were dictated by a man who had lost his grip on reality."

"I really would think so. I mean, vampires? In this day and age?"

"Excuse me, Doctor, but is it not possible that some lunatic might have thought himself a vampire and attacked the crew? Such cases are rare, but not unheard of."

"That's true, Spock, but it doesn't really account for the rest of the symptoms. Delusions are normally solitary things. Forty people, if they all went insane, would NOT all have the same fixation."

"So we're as much in the dark as we were before." James T. Kirk didn't like that, but it had to be said.

"Dat IS vhere wampires must hide." muttered Checkov, under his breath. He was remembering all the somber ghost stories, in which vampires played a prominent role, that his Nana had told him when he was young. He resolved to requisition a

cross from the chaplain as soon as he went off duty. Not that he really BELIEVED in vampires, but still...

* * *

On his way back to the cabin, after acquiring his cross, Checkov was feeling much more cheerful. Seeing that lovely new Ensign in the corridor, he decided to talk to her.

"Good morning, Ensign. You are looking wery pretty today. Will you join me for lunch?"

Josette smiled. "I think I'd like that. And please, call me Josie. I've never quite gotten used to the idea that I'm an Ensign."

"And I am Pavel." Teasingly, he added, "And Ensigns are vonderful people. I shoult know." By this time they had reached Recreation Room 3, so there was a break in the conversation while they got their lunches and sat down.

"You come from Russia, I understand. I've never been there. What's it like in Russia?"

"Ah, it is beautiful country dere. The snow gleams like tiny stars, and the mountains rise above it all. And vhere are you from?"

"I'm from Collinsport, Maine."

"Your name is also Collins. Is dere any connection?"

Josette nodded. "Yes, my ancestors founded the town. And you really wouldn't believe the house they built! What an enormous old rock-pile that place is. It has the look of some Gothic mansion; all it would need is some poor ghost trapped in one of the turrets."

"You liked it dere?"

"Oh, yes. Being such an old, established family, I had dozens of cousins to play with. We used to go around pretending to be smugglers and pirates, searching for the old hidden rooms and passageways."

"Did you efer find any?"

"Sometimes. It was kind of strange. I always seemed to know where the rooms were, but not always how to get into them. But enough about MY childhood. Tell me more about yours."

"Vell, ve usually vere playink in de snow. I liked to pretent I vas a Cossack, de leader of a great band..."

* * *

About a week later, Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy were having a meeting in McCoy's office.

"I have to admit to you, Jim, I'm really starting to get worried. First Morgant goes into that weird coma, and when he comes out, he's out of control. I come back to find one of my best nurses lying on the floor in that same coma, and my original patient walking out. He almost got away, too. We had to use a phaser on full stun to get him subdued. Then the nurse starts acting funny when she wakes up. And neither one of them will eat anything, and in seven days not one of their vital signs has changed from when they were comatose. I don't know how they are managing to function in that kind of state."

"This epidemic, if that's what it is, is starting to worry me, too. Two people found unconscious, for no reason, sounds like the beginning of those log tapes, and I don't like it."

"Well, Jim," McCoy paused long enough to pour them each a drink, "I've isolated a virus in the blood of the two who have been ill. It reacts like nothing I've ever seen before, though. Now, I've got to find out how to counteract it, and that's going to be tough. It doesn't act like anything in any of the medical records I can find. I even asked our viral expert to help, and Dr. DeMontaine says she's never heard of anything like this, either."

"How does it act, then? And please keep the explanation simple enough for me to understand it without a medical degree. I'd really like to know what's

happening."

The Doctor shrugged, then said, "Okay. You know that in a normal virus, the blood cells are attacked and destroyed? This thing doesn't destroy them, it coats them over to resemble itself, and the coated cells then proceed to do the same thing to other cells."

"What about the body's own defenses? Antibodies, things like that? Don't they do anything?"

"Only if the ratio between normal blood and this tainted blood is less than about 40%. After that, they can't change cells back quick enough to be any help."

"Is this thing contagious?"

"Not by breath or physical contact. It seems to need an open wound to transfer and that's only part of what's so strange about it. I can't figure out how it's being transmitted. The only clues are those two pinpricks on the neck, and they're just not big enough for anything like the amount of virus in that nurse's bloodstream when I only had my back turned for five minutes!"

"You don't by chance think this is some kind of sabotage, do you? A log tape mentioning vampires, followed by an outbreak of what resemble vampire attacks..." Jim trailed off, thinking. "There's something very funny about all this. IF we've got the same disease on board, then HOW did it get from the cargo hold into my ship? Scotty made sure that bay was unreachable...except by transporter!" Kirk slapped at the communication console. "Spock, I just got a hunch. Check all the transporter records since we left Starbase 12. Report anything out of the ordinary back to me as soon as you find it. I'll be in McCoy's office." Then he turned to the doctor. "You keep working on how. I'm going to start working on who."

* * *

Meanwhile, the man in the Inverness cape had figured out enough to know that everyone on this ship wore a uniform. *Perhaps I should change clothes for now*, he thought. Acting on his thoughts, he lured the hapless Mr. Freeon close enough to talk to, and proceeded to put him under hypnotic control.

"Tell me how to get a uniform which is correct for this ship."

"I will show you." And Freeon took Barnabas to his cabin, where he procured for him the uniform for the Security personnel. He then, under Barnabas' directions, showed him how to access the computer, at least enough for everyday things.

After learning all this, Barnabas decided to hide his coffin somewhere else. After all, if Angelique had left a note for him, she must know where he was. *And the last thing I need is to have her playing her tricks on me when I am not awake.*

Moving the coffin to one of the engineering tubes, used only when separating the rest of the ship from the main hull, he then proceeded to go to one of the Rec rooms to use a computer link. *I suppose I had better test out what I was shown, and maybe find out what Angelique is up to now.*

* * *

Meanwhile, Mr. Spock was busy finding out what Angelique had been up to before. "There is no error, Captain. The short-range transporter has definitely been used, not once but twice, the same night that Dr. McCoy says he treated the sick crewman. It is obvious that an attempt at concealment was made, but the person trying to hide their actions would seem to have little or no knowledge of computer programming."

"Can you determine WHAT got transported? It might help."

"It is only a speculation, Captain, but it must have been some sort of container. The mass readings are lighter on the second trip than on the first. And that amount of mass suggests only one thing--the torpedo tube from the cargo hold."

"So whatever the *Austrand* considered a danger is now loose on my ship!?!?"

Kirk wasn't incredulous so much as he was fuming mad. "When I find out who has placed this ship in jeopardy... " He trailed off, but the look on his face boded no good for that unfortunate individual. Shaking himself out of his reverie, he then asked, "Bones, how about you? Can you get a handle on this virus, so that we can concentrate on who set it loose?"

"Well, Jim, I can't say for sure, but I have a few promising leads."

"Doctor."

"Yes, Spock, what is it?"

"If I can be of assistance, I should like to help."

"McCoy snorted. "Probably think my illogical human methods missed something, right?" But he was smiling, and all three of them knew he was pleased at the suggestion. "Sure, Spock, come along and let me dazzle you with my brilliant deductions."

"Highly unlikely, but I will come anyway."

* * *

The man in the security uniform raised his head from the computer screen he had been studying intently, and stared in disbelief. That was impossible! She was dead, long, weary centuries ago! She could not be here! But the girl who had just walked to a table nearby looked almost exactly like his beloved... "Josette!" He hadn't meant to speak his thoughts aloud, but the girl turned towards him anyway.

"Do I know you? You look familiar, but I can't seem to remember where we might have met before."

Even her voice is the same. "My name is Collins. Barnabas Collins."

"Collins? Are you one of my cousins, then? Did I perhaps know you in Maine while I was growing up?"

"No, Josette, I am your cousin, but I doubt you have seen me before. Perhaps in the great hall, the portrait of my ancestor..." *Ancestor, HA! But I am not going into all that just now. I don't want to frighten her away, this time around.* "He moved back to England soon after the Revolutionary War, but one of my line often visited the family homestead in Maine."

"And the first son was always named after your ancestor. I remember reading about some of them in old family diaries. Wasn't there some personal tragedy involved in that move?"

"Yes." His voice gave no indication as to how much that memory hurt. "He did not have much happiness in his life, I fear."

"But about 2100 we lost touch, or your side did. What happened?"

"That's a very long story, and not very joyful in spots. Perhaps later I will tell you about it."

"I'd like that, but if it's long, perhaps it HAD better wait. I'm on duty in half an hour. How about you?"

"I have...some things I must do. Will you tell me where you are lodging? I will, with your permission, contact you later."

Josie was surprised, and a little touched. No other man on this ship would have asked her permission to call her, as though it were a favor. They simply would have gone ahead and done it. And she liked the way he talked, with that deep, rich baritone voice. She gave him her com-code and went to work, very happy to have met this long lost cousin.

* * *

As Angelique was making her way back to her cabin, her thoughts were far from complimentary towards herself. *Idiot! You should have helped those two to escape from Sickbay while it was still easy! Now that Kirk has them confined to the brig until further notice, there is no way to have them turn this into another Austrand, where the Master can prevail! Plus, He made it quite clear to me before he allowed me to go that this is the last chance we have to secure his stubborn soul as a prize for His army. The Dark Lord is NOT going to be pleased with this development*

at all... As she continued to berate herself internally, she stalked around a corner and ran right into James T. Kirk, who happened to be going in the opposite direction.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Dr. DeMontaine?" said Jim, delighted at the opportune meeting.

"Oh! Good afternoon, Captain. Nowhere special. I just wasn't looking where I was going. My mind was on other things."

"Was I in those thoughts somewhere? It would only be fair, because I've certainly thought of you."

"Why, yes, Captain, I must admit you were. And please call me Angelique, or Angie if you prefer."

"Angie, then." Teasingly, "Or are you an angel come to me?"

Angelique's smile widened. "Angels don't do what I can do. Why, there are people who think I'm a real sorceress, especially..." Her voice lowered erotically. "...in bed. Would you be interested in finding out?"

Kirk was a little taken aback. "You don't waste much time, do you?"

"Not very often. I'm interested, and interesting to you, if those looks you've been giving me are any indication. Besides, I have an...ambition to fulfill, and only a certain amount of time to do it in. Your place or mine, and when?"

Somewhat surprised at her choice of words, the Captain tucked away his questions. *I'll ask her another time,* he resolved, anticipating his method of questioning in this case with a very male delight at the prospect. "Your place, Monday night, 1800 Hours. I'll bring some wine."

"And I will prepare a surprise for you, something you will find much more interesting than wine."

* * *

A few days later, Barnabas and Josette met again, in the corridor in front of her room.

"Greetings, Josette. Is everything well with you?"

"Oh, hi, Barnabas. Yes, I'm fine, but it looks like Angie's got company."

"Angie?"

"Angelique DeMontaine, my roommate. She's a doctor."

"I see. How do you know..."

Josette interrupted. "That she's got company? We have a signal, a kind of do not disturb sign, that we use. So, since it'll probably be a few hours, can I treat you to a cup of coffee or something?"

Barnabas had not lived over 500 years without learning a few tricks. "Ship's coffee?" He said, making a face. "No thanks, but if you wish for something, I would be honored to escort you."

"I suppose you're right about the coffee they make on the ship, but I still could use a cup. It's better than nothing. And you may escort me whenever you like."

Barnabas smiled, and it seemed to light up his normally somber face. "Thank you, my dear. I just might take you up on that someday."

"You should smile more often. It really makes you look handsome. So tell me, Cousin, do you have a girl on this ship, or maybe back on Earth somewhere?"

Inwardly, Barnabas was overjoyed at the hint of jealousy in her tone. "No, Josette. I've been waiting for someone just like you."

"Really, Barnabas! There's no call to tease me that way."

His face turned serious. "I was not jesting. I was stating a fact. I have waited for you for what seems like eternity."

"Barnabas, sometimes you sound positively ancient. You're only...what? Thirty-five, maybe."

"Josette, my dearling, I'm MUCH older than I look. But now is not the time to speak of this. Later, perhaps."

"Always later! Well, let's go get some coffee, and maybe I can seduce this

long story out of you."

Dearest one, you probably could, if I were not sure you would run from me in horror. Nevertheless, it will be balm to my soul to see you try.

* * *

Angelique was NOT pleased. However, she was hiding it well. McCoy, on the other hand, was ecstatic. He had finally found something to counteract that weird virus! "Now, Dr. DeMontaine, to try it out on something other than a petrie dish!" And he injected the crewman who had been infected with the serum he had come up with. Then he studied the results. "Hmmm. Well, we're on the right track, but we either have to make it stronger, or give several doses a day or two apart. Well, you get some sleep. You've been up for thirty-six hours helping me, and we could both use some rest. I'm going to report the results to the Captain, and then I'm getting about eight hours sleep myself. And I don't want to see you near this lab for at least twelve hours!"

Angelique opened her mouth to protest, then thought the better of it, and stopped. *As long as he goes no farther with his research, it doesn't matter. And I'll see to that. Besides, I can't imagine Kirk giving HIM any help, even if he asked.*

Before she went to bed, however, she told Josie about the viral research. *I suppose I have to. After all, the way gossip works around here, the whole ship will know by morning, anyway. But Dr. McCoy had better not be allowed to perfect his cure!*

* * *

Checkov and Josette were having dinner together in Dining Room 3 when Barnabas walked in and noticed the two of them together. Although he could not suppress a twinge of jealousy at the sight, he had lived long enough not to judge any situation by it's appearance. *First I must find out what they feel towards each other, if anything,* he thought, getting a cup of tea so that he had an excuse to sit at the table next to them and eavesdrop on their conversation.

Before he could seat himself, however, Josette caught sight of him, and her face lit up with pleasure. "Cousin Barnabas! How nice to see you again! Come and sit with us, and let me introduce you to my friend Pavel."

Pavel was not pleased by this turn of events, but, in common politeness, he could not refuse to second the lady's invitation. As Barnabas sat down, he looked over this rival, and then saw Josette's face. *In all truth, she has nefer looked at ME dat vay.* And he resigned himself to the role of friend she had just named for him. *After all, dere are other girls on dis ship dat like me.* And, excusing himself politely at his first opportunity, he left.

Neither one of them even noticed. Barnabas and Josette were staring at each other as though there was no one else in the room. Josette was the first one to speak. Looking at the teacup that Barnabas had brought with him, she smiled and spoke. "I'm surprised that you would deign to drink what passes for tea on this ship. After all the times you used to insist that the family cook make your tea just so..." She stopped, frowning in confusion. "What was I going to say?"

"Josette, my darling, how is it you remember that? It was... *well over five hundred years ago!* The latter part of his statement he could not voice aloud.

"Really, Barnabas," Josette said, reaching over to take his hand in both of hers, "you always got so upset over things which didn't matter to me at all. You should trust me more. Now calm down. Your face looks as white as salt, and that can't be good for you."

"Josette." Barnabas was being very careful in his choice of words. "What are you trying to say?" *If this is not some galactic joke, it may be that her resemblance is more than coincidental.*

She looked at him, bewildered. "There was something I had to tell you, but now I can't remember what it is." Her hands were still holding his, and he grew hopeful

at that small comfort.

Barnabas figured it was time to change the subject, since she looked so distraught. "Come, let us go for a walk in the garden, where we can talk in privacy."

* * *

Jim was standing at the door of Angie's room, unsure whether he really intended to go in for another bout with the blonde or not. She was certainly skilled, and very knowledgeable about how to arouse a man, but somehow, she seemed not to enjoy being aroused herself. Looking at the door, then down the corridor, he decided to go in, if only to keep her from being gossiped about because of her neighbors having seen him lurking near her door.

When he got inside, however, she had not yet arrived. He decided to take a look in the small cooler that was installed in her side of the cabin. Perhaps there was some special snack in there that she had meant for them to share, since most people had no need for anything that could not be programmed on the console near the desk. Instead, what met his disbelieving gaze were several disgusting looking pieces of various animals. And wasn't that a bat's wing pickled in that nearest jar? Shutting the door, he sat down on the bed to think about this a little farther. Before he had a chance to figure out what it all might mean, the door swished open, and Angie rushed in. She had something wrapped in cloth clutched tightly in one hand. Not noticing the man on the bed, she punched in the door code that locked the door for anything but a yellow alert. Then she turned, almost dropping her precious bundle as she caught sight of Kirk. *I forgot that our date was tonight! Well, let's keep him occupied, and maybe he won't notice this thrice-accursed potion I came in with.* Putting down the serum carefully on the desk, she summoned up her most beguiling smile. "I'm afraid I lost track of time in the lab. Am I forgiven?" She followed the question with a wiggle that managed to show that she was in no doubt that she would be forgiven, if any man had the power to be angry in the first place.

Kirk smiled. "Come over here, and I'll show you," he commanded, forgetting once again all the questions that he had promised himself that he would ask her this time, drowning in the look of her, and the very special perfume she wore.

With the sensual motions worthy of a thousand credit an hour Orion Pleasure Girl, she stripped away her uniform, then his, admiring the strength of his physique, but not letting him touch her. Unbinding her long blonde hair until it fell halfway down her back, she began to sweep it back and forth over his body, from neck to knees, then back again, eliciting the erotic response she was looking for.

Suddenly, her willing victim turned, grasping at her shoulders, pushing her into the mattress. She said nothing, but pushed her arms free to grab at his back. When Jim began to caress the white skin near her neck, she frowned and pulled his hands free. And that was the way it went all night long. Every time that he tried to give her pleasure, her actions inflamed him to an animal rut. By morning, his back looked like he had been beaten, and his body had bruises in several places that would have given McCoy fits, (although Jim had no intention of letting the good doctor see them!)

* * *

Early that same evening, Josette had come across Barnabas, in the garden. Her voice was soft as she interrupted his reverie. "You really like it here, don't you?"

His head lifted from the rosebush he was staring at. "Hello, Josette. I believe that you enjoy such things also." *You always did before.* "Would you prefer that I leave, so that you may enjoy the flowers in peace?"

"Barnabas, I've been meaning to ask you something, and I'd like a straight

answer, please."

"If I can."

"Good. Here is my question. Whenever you see me, there is pain in your eyes. Why?"

"Josette..."

"Honestly," she said, gently chiding, "you're acting like you expect me to run off any second. What are you so afraid of? I LIKE you. I'm not going to leave you."

"You did once." It was barely a whisper, almost too soft to hear. "You ran in horror, and I have lived in hell ever since."

He had not meant to say any of that aloud. Josette's reaction would have had him out cold in shock, except that vampires couldn't faint. She was first bewildered, then seemed startled, and finally she was furious. "Barnabas, I do love you dearly, but there are times that you come up with the STUPIDEST ideas I ever heard!!!! If that witch hadn't been scaring me into screaming fits with her spells and her nightmares, I never would have acted like such an simpering little coward! Didn't you ever realize just how much of a hand she took in that whole wretched situation? And you fell right into her trap, at that! How could you have humored that little bitch, anyway?"

Barnabas was still too stupefied to reply. Then he found his voice. "I didn't know what she was until it was far too late to change anything."

"God, what a mess we both made of it, my love. If I hadn't been vulnerable to her potions, powders, and spells..." The thought of what might have been brought tears to the violet eyes, turning them almost black.

Tears of grief, at least, Barnabas had learned to deal with over their years apart. He took her gently into his arms, supporting her head on his forearm as she cried. After about ten minutes, her sobs became quieter, then ceased altogether, and she looked up at the man who was still stroking her hair as it streamed down her back. She gave a somewhat soggy giggle as she realized that he had taken all her hairpins out. "You haven't changed much. I'm going to have to pick up my hairpins from all over this garden, too, aren't I?"

Barnabas smiled, a little sheepishly. "I always did like it better down than up," he admitted, finally accepting that this was his beloved, returned to him. "Josette, how is it that you are here? I had believed that I would never see you again."

She smiled at her lover, a beautiful smile that he had despaired of ever witnessing again, and got up. "Let's go somewhere more private, and I'll tell you what I can."

* * *

They found an unoccupied booth, one with enough room for two, and she shut and locked the door. Then she sat down on the well-padded couch, having pushed it away from the computer console, so that there was room for the two of them to sit comfortably, and patted the space next to her invitingly. "Come, sit down. I am no more an angel than ever I was, so stop looking at me like I'm going to sprout wings before your eyes."

Barnabas came and sat beside her, but teased, "You always were my angel girl, so don't put it that way." Then his arms went around her, holding her with a gentle firmness. "Very well, I'm listening. Say what you will."

She smiled at him, and began. "I don't remember a lot of it. I remember seeing you, and watching, but not being able to get you to see me. Then, about twenty years ago, I saw an unfamiliar man, and he COULD see me. He said that I still had things that I was destined to do, and that I was going to get another chance to do them, if I wanted it. I said that I didn't know what things I was supposed to do, but that of course I wanted to set things right! He gave me a funny smile, bowed like a courtier, and said that was part of it, and since I had agreed, he would help me. Then he led me to the bottom of the cliffs, and there

was a little girl lying there. It will take some time and patience, he said, but here is your new body. I said, what about the little girl who owned this body originally? I wasn't going to shove some five year old child out of her own body. He waved his hand, and a little cherub appeared. It was the same little girl lying there. She said, go ahead, I don't need that one anymore. This body can fly for real! So I took the chance, and when I got old enough, I went looking for you."

"That is...incredible."

"But you believe me?"

"Oh, yes, my Josette. I believe you. I have seen many stranger things in my travels. I just don't know why you and I are so important to Him."

"Maybe because everyone is important to Him."

At that, Barnabas turned her face up, and kissed her tenderly, but thoroughly. "Josette? I love you, but there are days you talk too much."

She snuggled deeper into the arms that held her. "Barnabas?"

"Yes, love?"

"Would you think me very forward if I...if we..." He was looking at her with a tender amusement that irked her no end. "Oh, don't be so masculine and smug! It's been years since the Victorian Age, and we're living in the 25th Century now! I have every right to ask you to make love to me!"

"Josette." For the first time since they entered the room, Barnabas flushed and looked uncertain. "I can't...um...I..."

Now it was her turn to look smug. "Of course you can. You have hands and a mouth that are functional; anything else is just icing on the cake."

"Josette!"

"Unless...you don't want me?" Her burst of confidence was dying away as he just SAT there!

"Not want you?" It was a roar that a lion would have been proud to claim. "Josette, my love, I have wanted you since you first came into my view! I...just...Oh, never mind!" And this time the kiss was ardent enough that her arms went about his neck, to stroke at HIS hair and explore his ears. He shivered with a passion which he had kept in check for over 500 years, and began to seek the fastenings on her uniform.

She broke the kiss just long enough to mutter "Over the head," referring to the bright red Security tunic she wore. He stripped it off of her as she unwound her arms from him, taking his borrowed tunic with it. "Red really isn't your color, Barnabas. The next suit you buy, I'd suggest a nice dark tan or brown color."

"Josette, you can buy me suits in purple with pink polka-dots for all I care just now! Come back here!"

She complied, collecting another series of kisses as a reward for her compliance. Finally, they were both nude, their clothes piled in a tangled heap on the carpeted floor as she lounged on the spacious couch with the man she loved adoring the body he had dreamed of for so many long years. Carefully, using only his hands at first, he stroked and caressed from her collarbone downwards, at first avoiding her breasts, which seemed to quiver as he passed them by, as though disappointed for his neglect--but then his hands went back to them, drawing a small cry as she felt herself melt inside...

Slowly, savoring the power he had never truly believed he had over her passion, he lowered his head to the tips of her nipples, first one, then the other. Josette was beyond words. Her hands fluttered as though uncertain where to touch him, before she dragged his head up to hers, and they kissed again. Then his hands made their way downward, seeking and fulfilling her passion... The cry that came from Josette's mouth told of a response that was almost painful, as he stroked and circled, and his mouth sought her smooth and lovely throat. As she cried out his name in her fulfillment, his fangs gently pierced her skin, barely taking more than would fit in a glass of wine, and his expression became as blissful as hers.

After a few minutes, Barnabas realized what he had done in his passionate delirium, and he bolted upright as though he had been struck. "Josette?" His

voice was tentative and shaky, his hand over the two small holes he had made in her smooth white neck.

Josette stirred as though waking from sleep. "Hmm?" She was smiling. "What is it?" She sat up just enough to rest her head against his broad chest, her dark brown tresses tangling in his pectoral hair. Then she noticed where his hand lay. "Oh, that! Don't worry about doing what comes naturally. Besides, as soon as McCoy perfects his concoction, we can get that taken care of once and for all."

Barnabas' hands went from her neck to her shoulders, and he pulled back just enough to look at her face. "What concoction? What are you talking about?"

"Well, Angie told me... What is it, dear? You look almost ill."

"ANGIE!" His tone was furious, but his face was frightened. His arms went around her as though to protect his darling. "Right in front of my nose, and I didn't have the wits to see it! Angelique, that blasted witch! Darling Josette, do you know who your roommate is?"

Josette giggled. "I don't trust her one inch. She watches me, and I watch her. And I have a few precautions against witches that I always felt I'd need."

"Precautions?"

"Well, you won't want to see them, of course, not yet. But I'll be fine. And she's already told me this is the last chance she's getting. I didn't understood what she meant until just now, when I remembered who she is."

Barnabas' eyes leapt with a joy such as few people had ever known, then veiled over in worry. "If this is her last chance, then she is desperate. My dearest love, PLEASE be careful. And if you can, protect that doctor! She has killed more than once when someone got too close to a cure."

"And nothing will happen until he perfects this potion of his. I do have as much of a stake in this as you do, and I've trained in Security measures besides. Trust me."

* * *

"Jim, I don't know quite how it happened, but I think I just got proof about there being a saboteur on this ship."

"Bones, what are you trying to tell me?"

"Well, it's like this. I had just managed to perfect a serum that counteracts our weird virus, and I come back to the lab this morning to double-check the results so that I can duplicate the stuff. When I get there, my notes are gone, and so is the prototype of the virus. It'll take me a good month to duplicate the research without that prototype, and from the way our two victims of it are reacting, we haven't got another month to spare! They're both aging rapidly, and they'll attempt to attack anyone who gets near them. Add to that, they're becoming totally irrational! I don't know what to do for them if we can't get that prototype back."

"Well, let's see how much we can narrow down the possibilities. First, we're looking for someone who isn't a computer genius. Of course, that's more than half the ship, including me, so it doesn't help too much. Next, we're looking for someone with security access to the research labs, which narrows it down to those with the rank of Commander or better, as well as Medical & Research personnel. Finally, we're looking for someone who knew that you were on the brink of a cure on this. How many people fit all three criteria?"

"Three people. Myself, Nurse Chapel, and..." McCoy suddenly knew, but he also knew that Kirk had been making a play for the lady. Nevertheless, he took a deep breath, continuing "And Angie DeMontaine, the doctor we picked up at Starbase 12."

"Angie?" The Captain was both disappointed and oddly relieved. "Angie." He thought back to last night, remembering the burden she had carried in with her. "It must be her. We'll need to get Security to search her cabin."

"Jim, what if she's already destroyed it? We'll need to act quickly, and a Security team will take twenty or thirty minutes to assemble. Maybe we could commandeer a Security guard and do it ourselves, right now."

Jim was not going to say that she couldn't have destroyed anything in the five minutes since he'd left. Feeling a little guilty about having an affair with someone who had raised his suspicions from the first, but whom he had never questioned once, he agreed to McCoy's unorthodox demands.

Spock came into the room at that point, looking for the Captain. Kirk hailed him, waved him over, and clued him in to their suspicions, sending him to requisition the necessary four phasers, since he could move the fastest without being questioned. Setting him a meeting place about thirty feet from Angie's cabin, McCoy then nudged the Captain. A man in a red security uniform was just coming in the door, to sit down at one of the tables.

Kirk nodded in understanding, and he and McCoy went towards the dark-haired figure, while Spock went in the opposite direction, towards the door.

The Captain sat down at the table, McCoy immediately following suit. Their movement brought the dark eyes upon the Captain, with the man looking most startled by this impromptu visit.

"May I help you, gentlemen?" the man said, his face impassive, his mind churning with plans and sub-plots for escape.

The Captain was at his most conciliatory, realizing that no one liked having their leisure time imposed upon with no warning. "I realize that you're off-duty, Lieutenant, but we need a security guard for an hour or so to help us out on a small project." The Captain paused, frowning in an attempt to remember the man's name, then gave it up. After all, Security had a more rapid turnover rate than any other department on the ship. "I'm afraid that I don't remember your name, at the moment, Lieutenant... "

"Collins. Barnabas Collins." He relaxed a little. If all they wanted was a Security guard for an hour, he'd play along. Perhaps, if he really helped them out, he might be able to plead his case once they found out what he really was. "How may I help you?"

"Well," Dr. McCoy chimed in, "We have reason to suspect that someone has stolen a cure we formulated for the virus aboard this ship. We need to search her cabin and find it, or, failing that, find my research notes tape, which is also missing."

"Virus? You are confident that you can cure this virus once your notes and prototype are returned to you?" *Please, if You still are listening up there, let the answer be yes!*

"Yes, I can, IF I can get those notes back."

He shut his eyes for a moment to control the wild hope he was feeling, then stood. "Gentlemen, I will gladly do any service within my power in such a cause. I sincerely doubt that anyone else on this ship has more of an interest in restoring this cure to you than I do. Shall we proceed?"

* * *

Angelique was in her quarters, hovering next to the sink, about to open the vial and dispose of the contents, when the Captain overrode the locking sequence on her door, and the four men strode in. She froze in surprise for a few moments, which was just long enough to have Barnabas, desperate at seeing his last chance at a normal life about to go down the tubes (literally!) shape-change to mist long enough to avoid the bed and other obstacles in the path of the others, change back, and grab the vial, jerking at it with a manic strength which Angelique could not match. He threw the vial to the Doctor, who fielded it with a stunned expression, then backed out of the way while grabbing his notes from off the computer console.

Angelique was writhing in Barnabas' grip like a greased pig at a fair, screaming hysterically. "Damn you anyway, Barnabas Collins! I almost had you this time!"

"You NEVER had me!" he yelled back at her, as furious as she. "As for being damned, you did THAT Over-Five-Hundred-Miserable-Years-Ago, and I am sick and tired of your accursed interference! You've been a thorn in my side every time I had any

hope of becoming a normal human being again! I will not be your slave, and you will have no chance to find another, because I'm going to send you back to Hell, and I hope you rot in the hottest pit your accursed Master has!" By this time, his hands were around her neck, and tightening cruelly.

Angelique merely sneered, ignoring the hands attempting to choke the life out of her. "You forget, my unwilling plaything, just whom you attack!" Her voice rose in a tone unworldly, eerie, and loud enough to shake the room. "TURN ME LOOSE AND ATTACK YOUR COMPANIONS!"

That strange tone was also effective. His eyes went blank, and swift as an attacking panther, he turned on the nearest person to him, who happened to be Spock. Before anyone could recover from that voice and defend themselves, his fangs were buried in Spock's neck.

Then he froze, the intelligence coming back into his eyes. He withdrew, spitting what he had in his mouth onto the floor. "Yuck! GREEN blood! That tastes awful!" Turning, he threw himself back at the witch, this time tearing the amulet from around her neck first.

"Spock! Are you all right?"

"A most peculiar experience." Spock mused, shaking his head to clear it. "Captain, I am fine. Might I suggest that there are more urgent matters to contend with at the moment than the state of my health?"

By this point, Barnabas and Angelique were rolling on the floor, both attempting to get the upper hand, and neither succeeding. As they struggled, however, they worked their way over to Josette's side of the room, and Barnabas accidentally tangled one hand in the sheets, pulling everything off the bed.

Suddenly, Angelique uttered a despairing shriek, and vanished in a cloud of foul-smelling smoke, leaving Barnabas within an inch of an ornate jeweled cross which Josette had been keeping under her pillow. With a small cry of his own, he quickly picked himself off the floor, turning his back on the cross, and facing the phasers leveled in his direction.

With a small sigh, Barnabas raised his hands in surrender and stood still, eyeing the weapons warily. Utterly calm, he spoke. "There is no need for violence, gentlemen. I am in control of my actions again, with the witch banished."

The Captain, after witnessing that astonishing scene, was fuming. "Just WHAT are you, and what are you doing on my ship!?!?" he roared, brandishing his phaser for emphasis.

"It is a very long story. Over five hundred years worth, actually. But," and Barnabas shrugged, "if you truly want the whole tale...I was born in 1759 A.D...."

"Just cut to the chase, we'll get the details later! I repeat, what are you? And don't tell me you're some supernatural creature from 576 years ago, because I won't buy it!"

"I'm afraid that that is precisely what I am, whether you believe it or not."

McCoy broke in, after running a tricorder reading. "Jim, this guy's got the same vitals as the two we've got in the brig! How in the world can you run around that way when... WAIT a minute! Either you've been attacked the way the other two have, or you attacked them both! But you're rational, at least relatively, and they're raving like maniacs."

"If they have been confined since their awakening, they are probably starving."

"How can they be starving with no digestion to starve with!? It doesn't make sense! But then..."

"Doctor, if I might interrupt this medical consultation, I think that we'd better stash this one in the brig until we get this mess all straightened out." The Captain's tone was both exasperated and sarcastic.

"One moment. My bed is in one of your lesser used engineering tubes and without it, I most likely will not last more than a few weeks myself. If I might fetch it out, I will incarcerate myself willingly."

McCoy was interested in spite of himself. "What's so different about your

bed? Could it help the other two?"

Barnabas looked at him, started to speak, then shook his head. "If you do not believe that I am what I claim to be, then my requirements for a resting place would certainly not convince you otherwise. I had best fetch it myself, for it is doubtful that your people will recognize it for what it actually is."

* * *

On Starbase 12, the completely bewildered, REAL Dr. Angelique DeMontaine suddenly appeared with no memory of the past few weeks, nor would she ever recall them now that another Angelique had abandoned her body for other climes.

In the meantime, Barnabas's old nemesis arrived back in the swirling mists of Hell, still fuming. "Satan take it all, but he's stubborn! Well, I'll just have to go back and bring him with me this time. And maybe that little blonde Captain, too, as a bonus. And I'd better do it fast, before HE finds out I got banished!"

A voice boomed from within the mists, as a figure rapidly approached the quivering blonde. *YOU ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE, NOW OR EVER! I HAVE BEEN LENIENT WITH YOUR FAILURE TO BRING HIM TO US FOR LONG ENOUGH! HE IS STILL NOT ONE OF US, AND NOW HE NEVER WILL BE. YOUR SPECIAL PRIVILEGES HAVE JUST BEEN PERMANENTLY REVOKED!*

Out of the mist suddenly ran hundreds of tiny figures, grinning and brandishing all sorts of vile-looking implements. *SHE'S ALL YOURS. I WILL VISIT HER IN A FEW HUNDRED YEARS, AND I EXPECT YOU TO HAVE BEGUN MAKING UP FOR FIVE HUNDRED AND FORTY YEARS OF LOST TIME THAT SHE HAS COST YOU.*

"Sire, please, wait! I'll redouble my efforts! I'll get him for you this time, I swear it!" Still protesting loudly, the blonde was dragged off by her long, straw-colored hair.

* * *

Some time later, on the Enterprise, the Captain was at the door of the brig cell where this strange man had taken up residence. He was staring at the "bed", and at the man who was lying in it, now back in his own clothes. Turning to one of his companions, he queried incredulously, "Bones, is this for real? That's no bed, that's a coffin!"

McCoy shrugged. "He insisted. We searched it for weapons, took the sword-cane he surrendered and put it in storage, along with some antique jewelry he had in a false bottom, ran a spectrograph on it, and made sure that there was nothing in it's construction he could use as a weapon. He insisted on his signet ring back. We didn't see any harm in it."

"And what did the spectrograph show?"

"Ebony, brass, satin, and a layer of topsoil, along with iron nails to hold it all together. And Jim, the dating on every inanimate item in that coffin checks out as being at least five hundred and seventy years old, including the tailored suit and hand-tooled boots he's wearing, with some of the items even older!"

Jim shuddered as he looked inside. "The guy really looks dead. Spock, what about your research on the name he gave us? Did you find anything on a Barnabas Collins, past or present?"

"Collins, yes. There is a family in Maine, established before the American Revolutionary War, by that name. One of the Ensigns on the ship is from it. As for a Barnabas Collins, the only record we have of the name I got from a history which the Ensign brought with her. Evidently family genealogy is her hobby. And his birthdate was June 11, 1759, in Collinsport, Maine. She also had photographs of several family portraits. One portrait was painted in 1793, and it resembles the man we have in the brig exactly, right down to the wolf-head cane we have in storage that he turned over."

"Are you saying that you believe this kook, too? Come on now, Spock, let's not get ridiculous."

"I am saying that the data we presently have fits his claim, nothing more."

"Spock...I still don't buy it, but...he IS rational. Would you be willing to

do a meld to find out if this guy's for real, or if he belongs on a psychiatric couch?"

Spock thought for a few minutes, then said, "Since we cannot confirm it any other way, yes. Providing he agrees."

The man in the cell had been listening to all this. Getting out of his bed with a grace that bespoke long practice, he came to the door of his cell. Kirk, uncomfortable over the whole situation, spoke up. "Mr. Collins, or whoever you are, I'm still not convinced that you are what you claim to be, but I have a way I can prove to myself that you're sincere. If you will cooperate, I would like him to do a mind-link between the two of you."

Barnabas looked startled for a moment, then looked at Spock more closely. "The copper-blooded one? If you feel it will help, I will agree." Spock manipulated the door controls to drop the force field from the entryway.

"Wait one second," said McCoy. "Will he be safe in there?" The question was not directed at Barnabas, but he answered it anyway.

"I assure you, I would have to have been starving for months before I would try that again. No offense, but your blood tastes ghastly!"

Spock ignored that remark. Splendidly. While the other two covered him with their phasers (just in case), he reached out and laid one hand along Barnabas' jaw, seeking contact mentally as well as physically.

* * *

Spock dropped his hands to his lap, noting almost clinically that they were shaking.

The Captain, noting the tremors, dropped the door shield, to guide his friend out of the cell. Barnabas didn't move one inch until the door was back in place, then retreated back to his bed, slamming shut the lid with a horrendous bang that startled them all.

"Spock! Are you all right? You look pale as a ghost!"

"Captain...Jim, thank you for your concern. I need a little time to meditate. That was..."

"Well, is he faking it?"

"No." And Spock raised his hands into trance position, saying no more.

* * *

After about three-quarters of an hour, Spock unfolded his hands and looked up. Jim was pacing in the corridor, McCoy was watching him with a worried frown, and the coffin lid was still shut tight. He sighed, and his two friends immediately refocused their attention to his face.

"Well, Spock. Do you feel like telling us what you found out now?" The Captain's voice was soft.

"Yes, I think it would be best. Point One - Our guest in the brig really is 576 years old. Point Two - For most of that time, he has been what you would call a vampire. Point Three - He has been continually seeking to change this fact. Point Four - Dr. DeMontaine was responsible for his initial change."

"Are you saying I had a five hundred and forty year old research partner? She sure didn't look it!"

"Neither does he. I would suggest, since he has returned to you the means to cure our crewmembers who have been afflicted, that we also cure him."

"Wait a minute." This was from Kirk. "Are you sure he wants to change back? If I had eternal life with youth thrown in, I might want to keep it myself."

Spock looked at him for a long moment, then shook his head. "No, I do not think you would. The costs would not be pleasant, and you, in particular, would not want to pay them."

"What costs, Spock?" McCoy was getting curious.

"Impotence, for one thing, for another..."

Hastily, Jim interrupted. "Never mind, that one's bad enough!"

* * *

By nightfall, the rumor mill was in full swing on the ship. Checkov, who had heard most of them, was talking to Ms. Cho. "Vell, I saw Meestair Spock checkink records back to the mid-eighteent century, and dat vould make dis guy dey have in de brig dat old, maybe."

"Do you think they got that gorgeous jewelry from him, too? And the sword-cane?"

"Trina, I don't know. Anyway, vhat does it matter? If de man is really *nosferatu*, ve should get rid of him as a deadly danger!"

"No, no, no, you don't understand. If he really is that old, can you imagine what historical knowledge he must have? We lost so many historical records during the Eugenics Wars when the Back-To-Nature Movement started burning libraries down. He could tell us so much about our own past! He may even have met President Kennedy, or Napoleon!"

"Trina, I tink you are being romantic. You saw de two ve've been keepink in isolation. He's probably not goink to vant to talk, only attack! And ve don't really know ANYTINK about him. He may be somevone our age who needs a rubber room, not really a wampire at all."

"Well, I'm going to see if I can get permission to talk to him. I think you're just jealous of anyone else I am interested in."

"Trina, IF you get permission, promise me vone ting? Vear a cross vhen you are anyplace near him. I vouldn't vant you attacked."

"That's sweet of you, but I really think you're going overboard."

"Trina! Please?"

"Oh, all right, but only because you asked me to, not because I think it will protect me from some mythical vampire attack."

* * *

Josette had pulled the duty of guarding the three cells for the night. Actually, she had volunteered. As soon as things were quiet, she went to the cell containing the great black box, and dropped the shield so that she could walk in. Putting both hands on the lid, she swung it open. Barnabas did not move, but his eyes were open, staring into space. Josette frowned thoughtfully. She didn't care much for the look in his eyes, and his face did not show the peace that denoted rest for him. "Dear heart," she whispered, "what is it? Why do you look so wretched? What are they DOING to you?"

He blinked, then focused on her. Sitting up, he grasped her hand and kissed it, then dropped it again, sighing heavily. "Josette. Why are you here? Have you come to visit the freaks, like in the circus? It was kind of you to come, but..."

"Freaks! Circus! What are you raving about? I came to visit YOU, and you are no freak."

"No? Then what am I? Never mind, don't answer that. I may have been reminded that I am nothing but a monster, but I don't think I want to hear you say so. Leave me in peace." And he shut the lid, or tried to. Josette's hands were in the way.

"Stop that! What happened to make you feel this way? You are a good person, not a monster. Monsters have no heart or conscience, and I know that you have both!"

"And what of my soul? Do I have one of those, too?" His voice was bitter, sarcastic. "I think it might be easier to live without one. In fact, I..." He could not continue. Both of his lady's hands had pressed themselves over his mouth.

"DON'T! Don't you dare let her win after all this time! I will not allow it, do you understand me? I will not let you condemn yourself!"

She waited. Finally, he nodded, reaching up to hold her close to him. She

could feel the misery and anguish which he could not express, and the tears he was incapable of shedding welled up in her eyes and spilled over.

* * *

Spock was playing chess with his Captain in Rec Room 2 just before the change of shift. He normally won, but this time his thoughts kept getting distracted by what he had seen earlier, which would not be put in their proper mental place. *What must it be like, to forever be ruled by an instinct not one's own? Worse even than Plak Tow, I would think, for at least that is explainable as heredity, and soon over...*

"Your mind really isn't on the game today, is it, my friend? You just lost a bishop that you could have easily saved from my knight, if you had been paying attention. What's troubling you?"

Spock shrugged, but said nothing. Just then, the doors flew open, and a thoroughly irate Ensign Collins stormed in. Fortunately for all concerned, they were the only three people in the room. Coming to a halt, she said through clenched teeth, "Commander Spock, might I speak with you for a few moments?"

Spock looked casually at her, then did a double take. "I did not see the resemblance until now, but..."

Josette's smile was almost feral. "Oh, there is more than just a resemblance. What on Earth were you thinking of, to leave him in such a state of mind? It took me more than two hours to calm him down, and he was ready to go back into hiding, rather than get the help he must have. Do you know what that could have done to this ship, having him on the loose in that kind of mind-set?"

Captain Kirk, who was standing there with his mouth open, shut it with a snap. Spock had never had an expression like that on his face in all the years he had known the Vulcan. If Spock had been human, it would have been termed utter fascination verging on awe.

"Captain, with all due respect, will you please stay out of this?"

"What!" Kirk got a reign on his runaway Irish temper, and said, "Since my ship was mentioned, it concerns me also. Now, just who is the HE you keep mentioning?"

"My...fiance, of course. Barnabas! Do you know just how much that blasted meld hurt him? He was all set to go back to mist form and jump ship!"

"He's in a maximum-security cell!"

"Captain, really, don't be so dense. He's staying in there because he feels that it's his one hope of ending the nightmare that his existence has become. If he didn't want to be there, he'd be gone in five minutes flat! And you," she said, rounding on Spock again, "had best explain the situation to McCoy properly, so that the other two get fed, or you are going to wind up with two crewmembers on Tantalus Five! They're *this far* from permanent insanity."

Spock hadn't quite grasped it all yet. "His bondmate died in 1793. You cannot be she."

Josette looked straight into his eyes. "Are you going to argue over the nature of reality with me all morning, or are you going to get to work? You two have all of six minutes before the shift change, and I have several things in Angie's side of the cabin which need to be properly disposed of."

"Properly?" That was from Kirk, who had just remembered a rather uniquely stocked cooling unit.

"The chaplain and I will take care of it. They're not exactly anything anyone else on this ship could make proper use of, but they could definitely do quite a bit of damage in unskilled hands."

Spock bowed in a way that Kirk had only seen on a Vulcan High Council video excerpt, and then said, "Captain, we have 4.2 minutes to get to the bridge. Shall we go?"

As they walked out the door, Jim was still trying to argue with Spock about

getting more information on the events taking place. Spock's reply was, "I rather think that we should count ourselves fortunate that those who need to act are informed, and since OUR role in this is yet to come, leave well enough alone."

"Spock..."

* * *

Doctor McCoy, feeling like a complete idiot, was standing near the ebony coffin. Grabbing the lid, he opened it swiftly, before he could think the better of this. "Uh, if you're...awake, can I talk to you?"

The dark eyes opened, fixing on McCoy. "If you wish."

"Can you, um, get up? I feel like I'm talking to a corpse."

"A corpse? Very astute of you. That is, when you get down to basics, what I am." Then, seeing the embarrassed expression on the Doctor's face, he relented and sat up, swinging himself out of the box with the ease of having done it for years. Seating himself on the cot that was in the corner of the cell, he looked at the nervous man who still stood, shifting his weight uncomfortably. "What is it you wish to know?"

"The other two, Morgant and Nurse Mailing? You've said that they are starving. Since I don't want more people in the same condition as they are, how would you recommend we...um...nourish them?"

Barnabas' dark eyes closed for a moment in thought, then opened. *At least he's trying to understand.* "Doctor, you must have human blood in storage, or at least an available supply." McCoy nodded. "For them, since they have been unable to feed for over two weeks, you will need approximately..." He paused, calculating. "...three or four pints each. And it would need to be heated to normal body temperature. As for a container, anything non-metallic would work, although a soft plastic bag, not too thick, would be best."

"What about you? And don't tell me you don't need anything. I'd rather you didn't go crazy on me like the other two, and I'll bet any odds that you would, if you don't get...fed."

"True. This will hold true for all three of us. Normally, no more than approximately four to six ounces, every other or every third day, will suffice, until and unless this concoction of yours takes full effect."

"How come you're not starving like they are? Are we going to have more people suddenly in comas, with some kind of delayed reaction effect?"

Barnabas shuddered with distaste at that prospect, but answered civilly enough. "After the first fifty years or so, I discovered that if I didn't drink very much at one time, it took at least three...visits to the same person, within a period of less than a month, to effect a changeover--although the change could come about much faster if I were starving and took a great deal of blood at one time. I then swore never to do anything which might put some unfortunate individual into this miserable state, and, except for extremely stressful times such as my recent awakening, I have kept that oath. No one else on this ship this will change due to my carelessness, that I promise you. I have enough on my conscience already."

McCoy was startled by this strange man's vehemence, but accepted the promise just made. In a friendlier tone than anything he had used before, he asked, "Have you thought what you will do with your life if this does come off?"

A sad smile spread across Barnabas' face. "Endlessly."

* * *

The next day, Barnabas opened his eyes to see a young Oriental woman outside the door. Her tunic was blue, with a logo which appeared to be a stylized shovel. He was, by this time, bored with staring at the walls, and glad to see some company. "Might I be of service to you, young lady?" he asked, with the politeness which had been drilled into him centuries ago.

She smiled broadly. "Are you the man who has lived 576 years?"

I wouldn't really call it living. "I was born in the year 1759, if that is

what you are asking. Is there a particular reason that you wish to know?"

"Oh, yes. My name is Trina Cho, and I am an historian. I would like to know anything you can tell me about the past. We have lost so much of our history through wars and other disasters."

"Everything? That is a great deal of time to cover. Perhaps you could tell me specifically what you would like to know about?" He was somewhat amused at this girl's attitude. It reminded him of his beloved sister Sarah as a young child, begging for stories from any family member who would indulge her.

"Well...tell me about England. You were born there, weren't you? What was it like growing up in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War?" Ms. Cho's pretty face was animated with her thoughts. "Did you ever meet the King, or anyone like that?"

Barnabas smiled at the thought. "Dear lady, you are talking about a family in trade. The nobility would have had a fit if a merchant went to court, except to sell something."

"The caste system was so rigid, then?"

"I suppose, although certainly it was never thought of that way. You knew the social rules, and just how far you could go. Since it wasn't considered possible to change them, everyone, for the most part, accepted them. And, of course, if you had enough money, you could go to America, as my family did, where none of the old rules applied."

* * *

Time went on, and Ms. Cho kept coming, whenever she was off duty. Barnabas was always glad to see her, since she was a most entertaining modern person. Instead of the various negative attitudes that most of the ship had towards him, her attitude was close to hero-worship, which was a welcome change, even if he did get tired of being asked particularly dumb questions at times.

"Did you ever meet Napoleon in your travels?"

"Bonaparte or Solo?"

"You're teasing me. Napoleon Solo was nothing more than a myth. Bonaparte, of course!"

"Napoleon Solo was a very good man, if a trifle stubborn about some things. As for the Usurper, I would not have dealt with him under any circumstances."

"Is that what you call him? The Usurper? Why?"

"He took a place not rightfully his." And that answer, and the condemning words in which it was spoken, told Trina more about the caste system in which he was raised than a hundred words could have.

"You really believe that, don't you?"

"Yes, of course."

* * *

After a few weeks, McCoy had finally duplicated enough serum to, he fervently hoped, change all three sufferers back to normal human beings. "The problem," he mused to Barnabas, "is how do I inject a serum--through flesh which repels metal--into the proper vein? The normal hypospray that we use doesn't go deep enough and isn't precise enough to get at where we need to be for this."

"Let me understand this correctly. To work, your serum must invade the bloodstream?"

"And mingle, to break down that pernicious stuff that is coating the blood cells. But since we can't make a needle out of steel that will penetrate your flesh...any idea what causes that effect, by the way?"

"No, I have no idea how that came about. I do have a question, however. Can a satisfactory needle be fashioned from pure silver?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Are you saying that... "

"I am saying that if metal must be utilized, silver is the only workable substance available."

"In all the sources I've read, silver is poison to...your kind. That's why I

didn't consider it in the first place."

"In large concentrations, yes, silver can kill. But the amount of silver in the average needle is not enough for that. It will not be a pleasant experience, but..."

"You know, I've been thinking that this blood of yours might not be a bad thing to experiment farther with. If you have lived so long..."

Barnabas shuddered, then shook his head. "Doctor, don't even think about it. You have no idea what you would be playing with. Do you really want..." His voice deepened, and his eyes seemed to widen, transfixing McCoy's blue ones. "...Satan's minions to have the use of such a tool? They do quite enough damage without it, wouldn't you agree?" McCoy nodded his head jerkily. "Then we will not speak of this again."

* * *

Trina was in the Dining Hall, finishing her supper, when Checkov walked in. "Pavel!" she called. "Come sit with me."

Getting his tray, he walked over to her table, nodding to some of his friends as he passed them. "I'm surprised to see you, Trina. The vay you've been runnink around lately, vone vould tink you vere a deer, not a voman. Vhat has been so time-consumink dat you can't talk to me for tree veeks?" His tone was a gentle scolding, but it held a note of resentment in it, too.

"I've been working. I've been talking to Barnabas, getting his memories, hearing what things were like in his day." She broke off, sighing. "What a fascinating man he is. He's gone everywhere, done so many things. Just listening to him makes it all come alive for me."

"Do you mean to tell me dat all dis time, you've been listening to some ancient *nosferatu* babble fairy tales about tings he's probably makink up?" Checkov was alarmed and hurt. He was also getting angry. He knew Trina well enough to know that the look on her face when she spoke of this man was dangerous to the relationship between Trina and himself.

"It isn't fairy tales at all! Do you know, he even showed me his signet ring? That lovely thing was passed down from before his great-grandfather's time in his family. It's over a thousand years old! Isn't that amazing?"

"Trina, how do you know dat? It coult be a copy, a reproduction or sometink." Checkov was past angry now, he was worried.

"Not with that inscription! It's faint, but the wording inside that band is Middle English!"

"How could you see dat trough de force screen?"

"Oh, he's no danger to me. I shut that screen off when we're alone, and we..." She trailed off at the expression on Checkov's face. "Why are you so mad? Don't you trust my judgment?"

"Trina, you IDIOT! Don't you efer listen to me? Of course, he's a danger to you! And vorse den dat, you coult haf let him get out, and den de whole ship coult be in trouble!"

"Pavel Checkov! I am not an idiot. I told you, he wouldn't hurt me."

"De only vay you could be sure of dat is if...you must be havink an affair wit him!" The tone of his voice held absolute conviction.

Trina swung on him, not the normal slap, but a roundhouse punch, knocking him to the floor. "Since your mind is in the gutter, maybe you should join it! I haven't been sleeping with him. For one thing, he's too much of a gentleman to ask! But, I'll tell you this, if he DID ask, I'd say yes! At least he listens when I talk, unlike you!" And, in a towering rage, she stomped out, leaving Josette, who had been listening to the whole conversation, to help Pavel up off the floor.

* * *

Five minutes after she got Pavel to Sickbay, Josette went to confront

Barnabas. *If he's been encouraging that little Chinese flirt, I'm going to...*

She came to a stop in front of the cell, her eyes flashing angrily. Inside, Barnabas, sensing her presence, lifted his head from the girl who was weeping on his shoulder.

"So! Checkov was right, after all! Well, my faithless lover, if that little ingenue is what you're drawn to these days, then you can forget about me! I will not be coupled in tandem!" And she turned on her heel, walking away, ignoring his cry of protest.

Barnabas stared out the door, misery showing plainly on his face as Trina came up to him and touched him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry; this is all my fault. If Checkov and I hadn't had our fight in front of her, then that ridiculous idea would never have gotten into her head."

"What idea is that?" The response was automatic, his thoughts elsewhere.

"Oh, Checkov has the idea that we're getting it on in here."

"Getting it on? Getting what on?" Slowly, he was focusing on her.

"Getting it on sexually. It's ridiculous, but..."

"It is also impossible. I should have known it was too good to be true." Barnabas' tone was starting to sound more and more like a man at the end of all hope. "Trina, leave me alone. I need to think."

* * *

A few weeks later, Doctor McCoy and Mr. Spock were talking in McCoy's office. After having dealt with routine medical matters, the subject changed to the experiment going on in the brig. McCoy was puzzled by one thing. "I really don't know what to make of it. The other two are mentally fine, and looking forward to going back to work in a week or so. But Barnabas has been in a blue funk for over a month. Oh, he's cooperating fully, and he's scrupulously polite, but there's no enthusiasm there. And you'd think he'd be practically turning handsprings about it all. After all the time he spent looking for a cure...why's he so down about getting one? Are you sure that this was what he wanted? Not that we could reverse the effect now, but I just can't figure it out. He's acting like he lost his best friend, or something."

"Unknown, Doctor, but..." Spock suddenly whirled to the computer, scanning the visitor's log and on duty roster for the brig. Ensign Collins' name was significantly absent from both. "I believe I know what troubles him."

"Is it something we can fix? I kind of like him, and if there's something we can do..."

"I am not sure. I will, however, endeavor to find out." His first stop was to talk to Josette. Although she did not go into detail, she made it quite clear that she had no intention of talking to Barnabas until he apologized for his behavior. He then attempted to talk to Barnabas, and got no place there either. By this time, Barnabas was convinced that the estrangement was a fitting consequence for the sins he had committed over the years. Spock, who knew a little about how human beings always seemed to picture the All-Powerful as being more malign when their own actions were involved, finally decided to bring this problem to the religious expert aboard.

* * *

The next day, when Barnabas looked around, there was another man sitting just inside the door. Since the cure appeared to be working, the rules in the brig were more relaxed, and visitors were permitted to enter the cells. Barnabas was startled, however. Very few people had come to visit him lately. "Did you wish something?"

The man looked him over, then nodded. "Just to talk to you. Let me introduce myself. My name is John McGuire. I'm the ship's Chaplain."

Barnabas was more than startled at that announcement. "If that is what you

are, why are you wasting time with me? There must be more important things you could be doing."

"Perhaps I don't feel it's a waste of time."

"Do you know what I am?"

"I know what you *were*. Commander Spock told me some of it. But as to what you are, that you'll have to decide for yourself."

"What are you getting at? I am a vampire."

"Are you? Are you truly willing to categorize yourself as a vampire now, when you are on the brink of leaving that behind you?"

Barnabas was quiet, thinking that one over. The more he thought about it, the more it sank in that he was no longer limited only to what he had been. Finally, he broke the silence. "No. I'm not."

McGuire nodded. "Then what are you?"

"I don't know everything I am. I'll have to think about some of it." Another long pause fell over the room as Barnabas contemplated some of the possibilities. Then, "Tell me, why did you come? Just to talk to me?"

The chaplain shrugged, smiling a little. "If that's all you feel like doing. I came because I took an oath to help people wherever I could, and I felt I might be able to help you."

"Perhaps you can. I realize that the church I grew up in has changed by this time but, do you know anything about the Anglican faith?"

"I grew up in it."

"Do they still do individual confessions?"

"If the person involved feels that they need it."

"Then...do you have a time limit on this visit of yours?"

"No."

* * *

About six days later, Josette awoke from a nightmare to an insistent request for entry at her door. Still half asleep, she called out, "Come in, if you're so determined."

The door opened, to reveal Trina Cho. She stood, arms folded over her chest, just far enough inside the door to let it close, and stared balefully at the sleep-befuddled Ensign. "So here you are!"

Josette was still not fully awake. "Am I supposed to be somewhere? It isn't the shift change, is it?"

"No, it isn't the shift change, and yes, you should be somewhere! You should be at your man's side, instead of lounging around here."

"I don't have a man anymore. You took him, and you're welcome to keep him, for all I care."

"Sure, you don't care." Trina's voice was so loaded with sarcasm that it dripped from every word. "That's why your eyes are red and puffy, and why you need sleeping pills to get through most of your nights. You don't care for Barnabas about as much as a horta doesn't care for rock to eat! That's why you've been acting like a hermit whenever you're off-duty. That's why, when he's finally about to, in one hour, rejoin the human race, you're crying alone in your cabin!"

"I wasn't crying! I was sleeping, until you woke me up! I was...he's WHAT! Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure. Friends keep track of things like that."

"Friends." It was a sniff of disbelief.

"Yes, friends! Even if I were interested in being anything else to him, it's YOU he wants! Are you so stubborn that you're going to reject a man who loves you, just because he loaned me a shoulder one time when I needed it? Are your feelings for him that shallow, that you won't even bother listening to an explanation? Because, if that's really the case, then there are plenty of other girls who are interested in a man who's as polite and understanding as he is."

"Like you, for instance?"

"No, not me. I told you, he doesn't want me. And I have other qualities that I look for in a man."

Josette nodded. "Like a Russian accent, perhaps?" she said, testing an idea that had just come to her.

Trina's face went beet-red. "That man! The nerve of him, accusing me of being an idiot! Well, he's out of my life..."

"And you don't care either, right?"

"NO! Of course not. I...well, I..."

"You're crazy about him, aren't you?"

"Well, you're no better! Crying alone when you should have been talking it out with Barnabas."

Josette sighed deeply, then looked at Cho. "I'm going to make a deal with you. If I go make up with MY man, you have to do the same with yours. Well?"

"But...I...Oh, what the heck, all right. Now?"

"Now."

* * *

Barnabas was looking at himself in the mirror for the first time in many a year when a flash of red caught his eye. Turning, he saw his lady outside the door, looking at him looking at himself. "Hello, Josette."

"Hi. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Bowing in a way that reminded her of the first time they had ever met, he said, "There are few things I would like better. Will you come in and sit with me?"

Josette nodded, and looked down at the door control panel. Keeping her eyes fixed on it as though fascinated, she said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to fly off the handle, but..."

"Josette."

"Yes?"

"Are you coming in or not?"

"Yes, if you want me to."

"I will always want you near me, if I have the option."

"Even when I act like a jealous fool?"

"Any time at all. Now come here. Please." She did. He smiled, holding her, his hands entwining with hers.

For a while, they simply sat together, enjoying the sensation of support and comfort that both felt. Slowly, her hands began moving up his arms, to entwine about his neck. He slowly began to move one arm to her hair, which she had not bothered to pin up, and began to run his hands through the soft, shining mass. There was no urgency in his movements, but only a delight in the knowledge that what he had dreamed of, all he had prayed for through years uncounted, was finally within his grasp.

* * *

About ten minutes later, Dr. McCoy came to the brig to give the final injections to his three patients. After injecting Lieutenant Morgant and Nurse Mailing, checking them over and certifying them fit for duty, he turned towards the corner cell. What he saw made him doubt his eyesight for a minute. There was Barnabas, lying on the cot provided, the covers over his lean frame. That was fine, although he'd never slept there before. What was so astonishing was the long brown hair that seemed to be growing all over him! "What is this?" McCoy speculated aloud. "Did he grow hair overnight, like some kind of fictitious werewolf?"

Barnabas heard the question, and his eyes opened. "No, that's my cousin Quentin's problem, not mine." Leaning over, he gave his lady a gentle nudge, so that her head shifted around to see the doctor, who was still standing in the hallway. She gasped, turned as red as the tunic lying on the floor, and attempted

to bury herself in the blankets. "Any other questions?"

"Just one. Should I come back in an hour or so?"

"No, that won't be necessary!" Josette said, her voice muffled. "But if you could turn your back for a minute..."

The good doctor complied, somewhat amused at the way things had turned out. Then Barnabas' comment hit him. Still studying the opposite wall, he asked, "What do you mean, hair is Quentin's problem? Are you saying your cousin really IS a werewolf?"

"Well, he was, but I would doubt he still lives. That was a few hundred years ago."

"Doctor, you can turn around now." Josette had gotten herself decent. "But, my dear, Quentin does still live. Or at least he did a year ago when I was home on leave. He said he was keeping things in order until I came back."

"Why until you came back?"

"Well, the thing is, we three are the last of the direct Collins line. I inherited that whole conglomeration, and believe me, the credit balance is enough to keep a sybarite in luxury for the rest of his days just on the interest alone. I was more than happy to let Quentin run things; the administration of so large an estate was one long headache."

"But how does he cope? Or did he find a cure?"

"No." She giggled. "He goes on retreat to a fortress built to his specifications one week out of every month. He seems to get a real kick out of the villagers' attitudes. He's considered the local rich eccentric."

Barnabas snorted in sardonic amusement. "He seems to have developed quite a sense of humor in the last hundred years or so if he's treating such a thing like a cosmic joke."

Doctor McCoy came in, carrying the gleaming silver-tipped hypodermic. "Sometime I've got to meet this cousin of yours. He sounds like a real charmer. Now, if I might proceed?"

"Certainly." Then the thought hit him. "Doctor, if I may ask it, could you please consider my cousin's unfortunate state as confidential? He has found much grief when people realize his true condition."

"Well, O.K., if you don't want me to say anything, then I'll consider it under the Hippocratic Oath."

"Thank you."

* * *

Meanwhile, Trina was still searching for her pig-headed Russian lover. Finally, she found him, passed out in one of the Rec Rooms, with about ten vodka bottles forming a corona around his head. She sniffed, wrinkling her nose at the overpowering odor of alcohol, then swung Checkov's arm over her shoulder and got him standing up. He muttered something unintelligible, but was cooperative enough to move his feet when asked. Finally she got him into the nearest private place, a recreation booth big enough for two, and locked the door, using a locking sequence that could only be countermanded for an alert, or if a particular string of numbers was punched in on the keypad. Then she swung him onto the large, well-upholstered couch, and sat down to wait. It took about three hours before Checkov stirred and sat up, murmuring indistinctly in Russian what sounded like an oath. "Vhat hit me?" he groaned, in English.

Cho sniffed at the ludicrous question. "About two gallons of vodka, unless I miss my guess. Really, Pavel, if you wanted to kill yourself, why didn't you just slit your throat? It would have been less painful."

"Vhat do you care, anyvay? You've got your 'fascinating' *nosferatu* to take care of you. Vhy don't you leaf me alone?" He stumbled to the door, found it locked, and stumbled back to the couch with a groan for emphasis.

"Because I care about you, you jealous, stubborn, pig-headed, chauvinistic Russian imbecile! Because I...I...oh, why am I bothering with you anyway?" And

she sat down abruptly, covering her face with her hands.

"Trina?" Checkov had never been very good with tearful females. "Trina? You're not cryink, are you?"

"Me? Cry over you?" The voice was muffled by the hands over her mouth. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"Den, if you're not cryink, vhat ARE you doink?"

"I'm...I'm...I'm practicing for the part of Anna Karennina! Oh, just go away, why don't you?" Her voice rose to a wail of distress, then she broke into sobs as she sat on the floor.

"I can't. You locked de door, remember?" His voice was wry. "Vhy did you do dat?" He got on his knees, then sat on the floor next to her, putting one arm around her shoulders.

"Because I wanted to talk with you without you stalking off again."

"Trina. I vas not de vone who walked out on de argument."

"No." She had stopped crying, but her breath was still uneven. "Pavel, I'm not sorry I hit you. You deserved that, for calling me an idiot in public. But I am sorry I lost my temper."

He rubbed his jaw, remembering. Then he shrugged. "I insulted you in public. Ant you hit me in public. I guess ve're efen." Then he reached out his other arm, so that she was trapped. He lifted her to the couch. "You may like sittink on de floor, but I don't." Then he lifted her chin with one hand and kissed her.

"Pavel! Don't. I... What about your hangover?"

"Trina! I'm surprised dat you vould even ask such a ting. A little wodka can't keep a goot Russian down."

"Oh. Well, in that case... " She wound her arms around his neck with all the enthusiasm any man could wish, kissing him back.

* * *

"Doctor, are you absolutely certain that there's no possibility of a relapse? He's not going to ever become vampiric again?"

"Josie, when I do my work, I do it thoroughly. It's been over a month since his last injection, and the last tests I ran showed all the normal readings for your average thirty-five year human male. He's as human as you or I are. The only abnormal reading is his strength. Somehow, he held on to that when he changed back."

Josette smiled. "Thank you, Doctor, for everything."

"Josie, girl, what are you up to? My Joanna only smiled like that when she about to get into mischief. You're planning something."

Her smile broadened. "True. But don't worry. I'm just going to rid the ship of a little excess baggage, now that you gave me the go-ahead."

McCoy was puzzled, but let her go without further questions. She immediately went to the cabin which Barnabas had been lent until they could rendezvous with a ship going to Earth. "Hello, love, are you busy?"

"Josette, I'll never be too busy for you." Then he noted her air of repressed excitement. "Darling, what are you plotting about now?" He might have been completely besotted with his dearling, but even he recognized that look on her face.

"Do you know what today is?" He shook his head warily. "It's Independence Day, and we're going to go celebrate! Come with me. I have one chore to perform, and then we're free to do whatever we choose."

She was almost singing in her joy. Taking his arm, she led him to one of the cargo bays, where a large black coffin sat in the center of the room. Before he could say anything, she pulled out a phaser and fired it in a long burst. The box pulsed, turned red, and finally disappeared. Barnabas stared at the empty space for a moment, then stared at her; for the first time in five centuries, he laughed in genuine delight, picking her up and swinging her around and around. Then he kissed her, then he swung her around again, while her laughter and his echoed off

the walls.

Finally, out of breath, they sank to the floor, mouths locked in still another kiss. When he got his breath back, he said, "Dr. McCoy confirmed it, then?"

"Yes. And...something else. My love, I have a gift for you."

"Oh? Whatever it is, it cannot give me more joy than you have just done." He smiled down at her radiant face, still pink from the whirling about the room.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, if I were you." And taking his hand, she held it to her stomach in a gesture old when the Caesars still ruled Rome. "I carry your child within me. Dr. Soong confirmed THAT this morning, too."

He lay with his hand where she had placed it for long minutes, then moved abruptly. Scooping her into his arms, he carried her out of the hold and down the hall. "Darling, what are you doing? I can walk! Where are you taking me, anyway?"

"Hush. This is not the time for you to show that stubborn, independent streak of yours. We're going back to my cabin to pick something up, and then..."

"Then WHAT!? Lover, put me down. This is embarrassing."

"Shhh." He put one finger to her lips, and, with a sigh of resignation, she settled back into his arms for the trip back to his cabin.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, they had stopped at his cabin. He'd gotten out a small box, putting it in his pocket, scooping her up again, ignoring her renewed protests, and setting her down only after they had reached the ship's chapel. "My love, would you mind very much telling me why you brought me here?"

"Well, I was going to wait until we got back to Earth, but you moved the schedule up a notch or two. Josette, my beloved, it may be almost a year before we get back to Earth, and..."

"And?" She was almost sure of what he was going to say, but she was going to make him say it anyway, if only so she'd have a romantic story for the child to hear.

He opened the box from his room, revealing the Collins wedding band, which had been passed down from eldest son to eldest son since 1372, and handed it reverently to her.

"And I think it would be best if we married here and now."

"Barnabas, darling, I've been waiting to marry you for most of my life, but even so, it would be nice if you gave me a few days to get some things together. Flowers, maybe. A nice dress. Besides which, the chaplain hasn't even agreed to marry us yet!"

He mulled that one over for a few minutes. "One week, and that's final!"

"I'll take it. One week. Now, will you please talk to the chaplain, since we'll need him to be in on this bargain, too?"

* * *

And so, a week later, the marriage that had taken five hundred and forty-one years to arrange took place, not in the Collins family chapel, but on board the starship that had given them back their future. Captain Kirk even unbent enough to give them two gifts. The first one was an acceptance of the resignation of Ensign Josette Collins, Security, for "personal reasons." The second, much more appreciated gift, was the use of a luxuriously equipped, extremely fast shuttle which he had purchased for his own use, "to get the newlyweds home to Earth." In all truth, Barnabas rather suspected that he did it more to be rid of them than to gift them with anything, but he bore no grudge. It was asking quite a bit for any man to swallow such a ridiculous tale as vampires. If he didn't know better, he wouldn't have believed it himself.

* * *

About three and a half years later, the *Enterprise* was granted that rare

treat, shore leave on Earth, while the ship went through various procedures at the docks at Starfleet Home Base. One night, after having relaxed on the beach all day, ogling the pretty girls, Kirk suddenly woke up the next morning to find himself, Spock, and McCoy in a bedroom he had never seen before, five stories up, with a barred window opening upon a rock-strewn coastline. *I don't know where we are, but this ISN'T San Francisco,* thought the Captain, staring distractedly at an oil painting of two sturdy-looking, dark-haired toddlers on the opposite wall.

Spock opened his eyes, assessing the room, then closed them again. Then he opened them again, nodding at the other two men. "I believe I know where we are, Captain."

"Well, it's nice that somebody does." retorted McCoy, who seemed to be struggling with the remains of a headache. "How about you enlighten the rest of us?"

"It is only a speculation, but..."

Suddenly a roar was heard from outside the window. "You did WHAT! Cousin, I realize that you're impatient, but this harebrained scheme of yours is more than simply one of your normal practical jokes. Do you realize the seriousness..." and the voice faded as the two men sixty feet below walked out of earshot.

Kirk nearly moaned aloud. He knew that voice.

* * *

About an hour later, the outer door swung open, leaving a large heavy set of iron bars securing the doorway. A man stood just outside. He was about 5'9", his hair was brown and wavy, and his brown eyes were shining as though with glee. "I'm afraid my cousin is most annoyed with me. You probably are, too."

"Annoyed! I'm furious!" And James T. Kirk in a fury was someone to stand in awe of. "Mister, I don't know who you are or what you want, but you are in a LOT of trouble! Have you got any idea of the penalty for kidnapping a Starship Captain!?!?!?"

The man made a face. "Well, you see, Captain, that was a mistake. I didn't mean to kidnap you at all!"

"Then what were you trying to do?" Jim toned down his voice a little, (although not much) upon hearing the man's admission that this was all a misunderstanding. At least, he thought that was what this man was trying to say.

"This wouldn't have happened if I'd hired detectives with an ounce of brains, I assure you."

"That's nice to know, but you're not answering my question! *WHAT WERE YOU TRYING TO DO!?"*

"Well...I know that your Doctor McCoy is something of a medical genius..." McCoy was preening a little at that. Spock put on his best "old stone face" expression. "...and he has helped several people whom normal science was not able to help..." McCoy grinned some more. "...and I thought, since I have an extremely rare medical condition, I might be able to persuade him to help me also, once I hit upon the means to get and keep him here."

"Don't you think that decision should be left to him, Mr....?"

"Collins." The voice came from the doorway, dry with a note of somber humor. Barnabas did the introductions in the best DeBrett manner. "Gentlemen, Doctor McCoy, may I introduce my unfortunate cousin, Quentin. Cousin..." Barnabas pulled at his elbow. Quentin didn't budge from the door.

Doctor McCoy nodded pleasantly at the introduction, then the smile disappeared off his face as he remembered just what the "extremely rare medical condition" really was! *How in heaven's name am I supposed to cure a werewolf? I had enough trouble with the other one!* "Oh, no," he breathed, the prospect of being stuck here forever overwhelming him. "Here we go again!" And he crumpled to the floor in a dead faint.

- The End -

[Susan L. Rock is a thirty-four year old, lifelong science-fiction and fantasy fan who has always felt that there must be more to the story. Like many a fan before her, she finally decided, "If they won't tell me all the details, I'll write them myself." Although she has written several scripts for the local Religious Education group, this is the first story that has been submitted to an editor. However, there will be a HIGHLANDER story coming out soon, and a few more in the works.]

DAVID'S JOURNAL

by

Lorraine Anderson

April 7, 1985

Tonight I got bitten for the last time by the big D. I am now a member of the Official Association of Vampires and Vampiresses. I'm honored--I think. But what could I have done? It's not like I invited him. I don't think. He said I invited him with my subconscious mind, but I don't quite believe it, you know?

Anyway, after the guy bit me, he kissed me on both cheeks. I was tempted to punch him out, but, after all, he was the boss now--and besides, I was so weak I couldn't have swatted a mosquito and gotten away with it. I went to the mirror in the bathroom, instead, and shocked myself silly. I could see myself! I turned around and was about to ask what the deal was...but Dracula is just not one you demand answers from. Besides, I could see him in the mirror, too.

So I looked back at the mirror and opened my mouth to check out my teeth. I guess the expression on my face tipped him off, for he looked at me, smiled, reached into his mouth, and pulled out a false plate. He handed it to me, grinning. I felt the incisors and cut my finger. So then I stood there, sucking my finger, while he looked at me, laughing. I don't like his laugh. It sounds like a troop of giggling spiders.

"They are sharp," he said, still smiling. I blushed. I didn't know I still could.

A horn beeped outside, he looked away, and I got a chance to look at him closely. He was tall, black-haired, light-skinned--just like the movies--and he was getting a beer-belly. I looked again. I thought he was skinny when he came in. Well, no matter, I was kind of cloudy then, anyhow. I wondered whether I would have to get that fancy suit he had on. I'd feel sort of silly in a cape, and I can't afford one, anyhow, going to college and all.

He only looked away for a second. His green eyes looked hard, like emeralds, as if he noticed me looking at him, but he only laughed. "Now, my young recruit," he said, "your training begins."

"Training," I squawked.

"Training," he said, in that thick foreign accent. I wondered whether he had hung around some of those old Hollywood producers and that's where they picked up on the accent. I shook my head. I was getting silly.

"We must banish all that propaganda. Vampirism is simply just a...state of mind," he grinned, "and will affect your physical condition very little."

"Except for the craving for blood," I ventured shyly.

He looked at me. "Yes. There is that." He looked out of the window, then shook his head. "You will learn to enjoy your condition." He looked back at me. "There are many, many advantages."

Crap, I thought.

He looked sharply at me. "You don't believe me."

I shook my head.

"You will." His tone was final. He turned away. "The media," he muttered. "It hypnotizes. It is so hard to find good recruits... You are in an old and prestigious institution now. We work to benefit mankind, asking in return only a little blood. Remember that." He reached into his cape and pulled out a package wrapped in brown paper. "Open it."

I did. It contained a set of false teeth (fangs, I guess I should say) and a short black cape. "Every new recruit gets these. If you work hard, you will get your member's cape." I wanted to ask him about this organization he kept talking about, but he caught sight of the picture taped to the ceiling above my bed. "Your girlfriend?" he asked, baring his teeth so that they shone in the sick yellow light of the overhead lamp. "Very nice. Very nice."

I must've made some sound, because he turned back to me and said, "I will not touch her." I think he was crossing his fingers. "Now, your training must begin. Bite me." I looked at him. "Bite me! This is your first lesson." I moved towards him, but tripped on a fold in my carpeting. I landed at his feet. His pointed, black shoes were caked with mud.

"Get up," he sighed. "Try again." I got up, looked up, and found I was staring him straight in the face. I could see every little pimple. He could've used some mouthwash.

Anyway, he was quite a bit taller than I am. I couldn't reach his damned neck! "Get the footstool," he said impatiently, and I did, perching on it nervously. He turned his head and looked at me. "Are we going to stand here all night? You haven't even put in your teeth."

"Oh," I said. I had forgotten about that. I looked around, discovered I still had them in my hand, and put them in. They felt weird. I'll have to make sure I don't bite my tongue when I have them in.

I bit, and almost choked on the stuff that squirted into my mouth. Actually, it wasn't that bad. Rather like a vanilla malted with a bit of steak rolled in. He looked satisfied and pinched the wound shut. "That's enough for now," he said, turning away. "It will hold you until the next time."

He gave me one more instruction before he left, and that was to start writing this journal. He says that he has kept one for many years, and that it has, in fact, become a tradition among the members of the organization. Well--I'll give it a try.

* * *

April 8, 1985

He stopped by again today to give me another lesson. He didn't stay long--I think he had another appointment. He had an awfully eager look in his eyes.

Anyway, afterwards , he made me give him this...which kinda made me embarrassed, considering what I said about him. He raised his eyebrows when he saw what I was keeping it in--the back section of a five subject notebook--but I didn't have anything else on hand, you know? Anyway, I think this will fit rather nicely with my new lifestyle, being behind my anatomy notes and all.

His face was blank when he read it over, then he sighed. "More description," he said. "How will you know of who you were five hundred years from now?" That made me start. I had forgotten about this immortality bit. That's right, vampires are supposed to be the undead, aren't they? But I don't feel dead.

Well, anyway, here it goes. My name is David. David James DeVries. Like my name, I'm your average Dutchman, with blue eyes and sandy-brown curly hair. Your basic average-looking White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, I am, I guess, with official membership in the Methodist Church. (I wonder what the Methodists think about vampires?)

I'm also your average college student--a sophomore--and just getting all my basics behind me. I haven't decided whether I'm going to be a biology major, or a computer major, or maybe both. Which is how I've managed to take Fortran and

Anatomy in the same semester.

I just thought--my God, what are Mom and Dad going to think? "Mom, Dad, I died yesterday. How do you feel about having a vampire for a son?" Yeah, right. "I joined the Official Association of Vampires and Vampiresses yesterday. Do you mind?" Sounds like a joined some sort of cult. Come to think of it, I did, didn't I? I guess I had better not tell them at all. At least I got a single here at school--no inconvenient roommate to explain my hours to. Except Heather.

Heather is my sometimes steady girlfriend. I wrote that because sometimes she goes out with me, sometimes with someone else, although I don't let on I know. She's the most beautiful girl I've ever gone out with. She has brown hair and brown eyes. She's 5'5" (Just the right size for me as I'm short myself), a good figure, and what legs! She says that I'm dull, but she's working on it.

I guess I'm not dull anymore, am I?

Pardon me while I come to grips with my new status.

I'm back. I still don't understand it. I don't feel any different. I went out today to go to my first class, completely forgetting that vampires are supposed to turn to dust or something. I was halfway there before I remembered. I must've made a great sight. There I was, stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, my face probably white as a sheet, checking all my limbs for some kind of decay.

There wasn't any, so I went on to class. Maybe it was an old wife's...vampire's tale. On the other hand, a wooden stake or a silver bullet would kill anyone, if they were stupid enough to get into that kind of situation.

In the cafeteria, I checked myself for a craving for blood. There wasn't any. I sensed a big distaste for breaded fish, which concerned me for a second until I remembered that I didn't like breaded fish that much, anyway.

Ok, so it sounds silly.

The rest of the day went just fine. I went to all my classes, did my homework, went to supper, did more homework, and watched TV until he came. I have to admit, I've felt queer all day, but I guess that's to be expected.

* * *

April 10

Now he says that I ramble. What does he expect--an English major?

He also got down on me because I didn't have an entry for yesterday. I have never heard of Dracula being such a literary dude--so why is he down on my case? I mean, I know it's a great honor to be selected. I was told that enough times yesterday. But, I mean, sheesh!

Anyway, the reason I didn't write yesterday was because I was too busy, and he should've realized that. Am I expecting too much of him?

I should scratch that last part out. He really has been more than patient with me. But I guess I had better explain why I didn't write yesterday.

It was the end of a long day. I had two big tests yesterday--and I had to pull an all-nighter the night before just to get ready for them! Then I took Heather out for a pizza--she says I've been neglecting her lately, and I have. Then she wanted to know why, and, of course, I couldn't tell her, so she got mad, and wouldn't talk to me for the rest of the date. But I noticed it didn't affect her appetite any. She kept giving me little sideways glances. I can't figure out why.

Anyway, I had escorted her back to her room, then had gone back to mine. I had just turned on the stereo and climbed up into my loft and had just settled myself on my bed with all my books, and was, in fact, opening my Fortran book to study for the next day's test, when a knock came at the door.

I sighed. Why now, for heaven's sake? I was tempted to ignore it, but it might have been Heather. So I peered over the edge of the loft, saw that I had left the door unlocked, and said, "Come in!"

In walked the weirdest girl I have ever seen on this campus. Her blond hair looked like it hadn't been combed in days. Her eyes were rimmed with black, which led into a point off the corners. Her eyebrows were done so that they were thickly black. Her cheeks were garishly red, as were her lips. She was wearing what looked like nails in her ears. To her credit, small ones.

Her costume was more of the same. Her oversized black and white shirt was torn and off one shoulder. The jeans were conventional enough, but she was wearing spiked boots. She wore a chain around her neck--a real chain, like out of a hardware store. I couldn't stop staring. I mean, this is a pretty conservative campus, and I had never seen a punk rocker before, except on TV.

She looked around the room, then saw me peering down at her from my loft. She smiled, then said, "Are you ready to go?"

"Huh?" I said, blinking and shaking my head.

"I said, are...you...ready...to...go?" She spoke as if I were a child. After she spoke, I finally saw the black cape flowing down her back.

"Oh!" I said, and started to climb down from the loft. "Dracula must've sent you!" I regretted saying that right away; what if she weren't? But who else would dress in a cape, I reasoned to myself.

"Of course, he sent me." She looked at me, disgusted. "What did you think...oh! He didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Down on the floor, she was two inches taller than I was, and I felt slightly intimidated.

"About the meeting tonight. I guess he didn't."

"No. What meeting?"

"The Monthly Meeting of Vampires and Vampiresses."

"Oh." I raised my eyebrows.

She laughed. "You are new, aren't you? Look, I'll explain it to you on the way. Have you supped yet?"

"Yeah, I had supper."

"That's not what I meant. Look, where's your teeth?"

"Oh!" I said for the third time. "Over here." I got the cape and the teeth out of the dresser drawer where I had stuffed it the night before. There was still dried blood on the teeth, so I excused myself and went down the hall to the bathroom to wash it off. I noticed she looked awfully disgusted.

When I got back, she said, "Since we're in a hurry, you may as well sup on me. I'm well fed."

I recoiled. "Oh, I couldn't do that!"

"Why not, for heaven's sake? We're late!"

"I've never bitten anybody before--except him." I realized I was blushing, told myself to stop it, and blushed even more. I was making myself out into a complete idiot, and I couldn't help it.

She opened her mouth, then closed it. "When were you recruited?"

"The day before yesterday."

She looked annoyed. "So glad he tells me these things. Jeez, he's been absent-minded lately. Too busy thinking big thoughts, I guess. Look," she said impatiently, "go ahead and bite me. I don't mind. And you must be hungry. Most new ones are."

"Well...ok." I put the teeth in. "Um...could you sit down?" I lisped. "I can't reach your neck."

She sat down, still looking annoyed, and casually cocked her head to one side. I hesitated before I bit, and she sighed and looked bored. But when I did bite, she winced.

I was hungry. I sucked it in eagerly, but she stopped me before I went too far. "I thought you might not leave any for me," she said.

I stepped back and licked my lips. Definitely she was vanilla ice cream. Hey, this isn't bad, I thought to myself, then winced. What was I thinking? I guess my church schooling was surfacing, you know? Even though I haven't been to Sunday School since I was fourteen.

Anyway, while I was thinking all this, she was waiting impatiently for me, her mouth drawn back in a scowl. I went and rinsed my teeth again, came back to the room, and hesitated. "Um...do I have to wear the cape now?"

"Not until we get there. The cape only has to be worn for official meetings. Now, come on! We're going to be late." I turned the stereo off and followed her.

Her car, amazingly enough on this crowded campus, was parked just outside the dorm's front door. It was a mid-seventies silver Chevy Nova. That surprised me--I guess I expected a shiny black Trans Am. Her act was kind of hard to figure.

After leaving campus, we went down Rose and turned onto Westnedge, heading south. Neither of us had said anything, so I decided to speak first. "You said you were going to explain"

"Oh!" she said. "I did, didn't I? I forgot."

"That's Ok."

"Where we're going now--um, I guess you could call it a support group."

"Huh?"

"Yeah! You know we were picked to help mankind, didn't you?"

I blinked. "What? How can sucking blood help mankind?"

She sighed. "No wonder I've been getting weird emotional vibes off you all night. Nobody told you. You've been freaking out on the Bela Lugosi thing, haven't you?"

I didn't answer. Then I thought a minute. "Oh, yeah. He did say something."

"We...you and I and all the rest of us in this city...are enhanced. We're now generally smarter...and..." She looked at me and apparently changed her mind. "...and we're enhanced in other ways, also. We use these abilities to help out wherever we can. You'll find out, later. All we ask of mankind is a little blood. And, by the way, you are not dead, so get that out of your head."

How did she know I was thinking that?

"Anyway, back to the support group thing. I know it's an official organization, but, well, think about it. How many vampires do you know, right off-hand?"

"None."

"Right," she said, then paused. "Well, that doesn't mean anything, because we don't go around advertising ourselves. But there's not many of us out there. Only about twenty in this city alone."

"Why?"

"Lots of reasons. Has to be the right time of the month, for one thing. And it doesn't work on a lot of people, for another."

Lucky me, I thought, and I winced. Fortunately, she didn't seem to notice.

"Also, a lot of times, the choice just isn't cleared," she continued, turning right onto a side street. "We can't just take anybody in, you know." I suppose that was meant to make me feel better about it, but she had such an arrogant tone in her voice. She looked to the side, then stopped with a jerk. "We're here."

I looked up at the house. It was a nice two-story place and actually had a white picket fence. I guess I expected the Munster home, but it looked, well, rather homey. I shrugged and got out of the car. I wasn't too surprised by anything anymore.

We went up, and she rang the bell. An older lady answered it, and I realized I could be surprised. Good grief, she looked like my grandmother, yet she had a full-length cape on! (Well, I admit it was a yellowish lacy thing that looked like a shawl, but...)

She ushered us into the living room, offered us some cookies, and asked us what we wanted to drink. I guess I must've said milk finally, but I was trying to picture this little old lady attacking somebody to get her daily requirement of blood. Then I just put it back into a corner of my mind, and looked around the room at the other people. My English prof was there! He nodded at me, his eyebrows raised, and then grinned. Somehow, his being there didn't surprise me.

Far as that goes, I really wouldn't have noticed anything peculiar about any of them if I had seen them walking down the street. There were young people, old

people, middle-aged people--some in jeans, some in shorts, and one man was dressed in a business suit--a couple of punkers like my companion, and one former hippie--with hair down his back, and everything. (He was also dirty, and I wondered about her statement that the group didn't take just anybody in. He must've had some hidden qualities that I couldn't see.)

"We'll have introductions later, after Tepes gets here," she whispered.

"Tepes?"

"Dracula."

I suddenly realized something. "Uh...this is a hell of a time to ask, but what's your name?"

She started laughing silently. "Sorry," she whispered, trying to control herself. "My name's Denise Baker--but everybody calls me Denny."

We sat silently for a second, and then I leaned over to her and said, "Why isn't anybody talking?"

"We don't talk to each other until the ceremony's over." She saw I had another question, so she said, "And the meeting won't start until the senior member has arrived. Right now, that's Tepes."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Tradition."

Fortunately, we didn't have to stay quiet for long, the big D showed up right then--and on time, too. I was surprised--I don't know why.

I can't write about what happened next--I was told that it was forbidden to write about the ceremony even in a place as secret as a diary. I *will* say that I was officially inducted in, and that it was very beautiful and really full of love, and that I'll remember it the rest of my life. I know it sounds wimpy and stupid, but that's how I feel. (And I never thought I could love my English professor--although he did ask me afterwards whether I was ready for the quiz, and I lied because I hadn't even studied for it.)

Afterwards, Denny drove me home. We didn't say a whole lot. After I got in, I studied for the quizzes and went to bed.

* * *

April 11

I just looked at what I wrote last night. I wrote nine pages full! I've never written so much or even remembered so much detail in my whole life! My God, what's happening to me?

That's a stupid question.

I just called Denny up. She's taken over as my official trainer because he is going on to another city to visit another group. When she said he was flying, I gulped...but he's taking the plane...another myth exploded. She says he never stays in the same place for long.

Anyway, about the memory thing. Denny tells me that it's what supposed to happen. I should count my blessings, because the memory thing doesn't happen with a few. I am, I am! I aced Monday's quizzes, and I'm feeling really confident about yesterday's. I think I even passed English!

Nothing else happened today, other than that, it was really dull.

* * *

April 13

I was with Denny all day. She was teaching me how to mesmerize. It's the first step in learning how to go out and get blood on my own. I suppose it has to be done, although I'm not looking forward to it.

I was fascinated to find out that it was all done with ESP. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Anyway, I went to Denny's room. Denny lives on campus, too. She's an English major, oddly enough. Creative writing. When I asked her what kind of job she expected to get, she just shrugged. Interesting attitude.

Her room was not what I expected. I guess I thought there would be strobe lights and black-light posters of strange things or something. Instead, it was just a room. She had her bed made up like a couch, and there were little pillows on it. She had a yellow carpet, and posters of flowers on the walls. She was the only weird thing in the room.

After she let me in, she motioned to the floor with an apologetic grin, and I sat down. "Well," she said, "are you ready for your first lesson in mesmerizing?"

I realized I was clenching my hands, so I relaxed them. "I guess," I said, as relaxed as I could.

"Cross your legs and close your eyes." I did that, feeling extremely foolish and still nervous. "Now, open your eyes slowly as I count to five. One...two...three...four...five."

I opened my eyes. She was sitting in front of me, her eyes closed. I looked, and just about fell over. I could hear her counting, but her lips were tightly shut!

She opened her eyes and smiled. Still with her lips shut, she said, *Do you hear me?*

"Loud and clear!"

She smiled. *Don't use your mouth. Try to talk to me.*

I closed my eyes and tried to visualize myself talking. *Can...you...hear...me?* Opening my eyes again, I saw Denny wince.

You don't have to shout!

Sorry.

She smiled, and I felt like a kid with a new toy. *Much better.*

I sat back. "But how...?"

"...does it relate to mesmerization? I'll show you." And she did. It's kind of hard to explain. It's like talking to one portion of the brain and convincing it to go to sleep. But it works. I put Denny under a couple of times, and she said I was doing fine.

If you look past her clothing, Denny is a really nice person. If you can look past her clothing.

* * *

April 15

I went out with Heather again tonight, and I'm having real serious doubts about her. Let me tell you why.

I took her to a little pizza place by campus. It's her favorite, with a deep-dish whole wheat pizza she claims she could eat every night, although she couldn't, not and keep her figure. I'd rather have thin crust, myself, but that's alright. It's a nice enough place, with little plants all over the place, and real wood floors and tables and all.

We went to a booth in the back corner. At once she starts tearing at me about how we haven't gone out in the past week.

"But, Heather," I said. "I can't drop my homework every night. I got a paper due next Monday, and I haven't hardly started on it."

She flicked her gold-flecked fingernails at me and tossed back her hair. "I'm sure," she said, looking away. "You're not going to flunk. I mean, I'm sure that taking me out once in a while is going to do serious damage to your grades."

"Heather... I'm carrying two C minuses as it is. I need a three-oh to get into any science program, and I only have a three-one."

She flicked her hair back. "Well, that's not my fault."

No, it wasn't. It wasn't even Tepes' fault. But I wasn't going to admit it to her.

"Well, is it?" She must've thought I agreed with her, because she sat back, a small smile on her face. I started to get angry and was about to say something when the waiter came.

He was alright looking, I guess, but I was looking as Heather gave him a once over, then started flirting--smiling at him, making little gestures, things like that. I had a little session about "body language" in high school--I forget what class--and she was telling him she was interested. And, damn it, he was responding. In front of me yet! I had little doubt that they were going to get together sometime, behind my back.

We spent the rest of the evening in stilted conversation--you know, talking about classes, and such, but I could see she was really giving him the eye. But, when I dropped her off, she kissed like there was nobody else.

Damn it, I thought I loved her.

* * *

April 16

Denny took me out blood-hunting yesterday. She came by about 9:30 last night. I thought we were going to have another mesmerizing session, but she said, "Tonight, we go out hunting!"

I stared at her with my mouth wide open, and a cold chill went over me. "You're kidding," I said.

"No, buddy, I'm not." She smiled a rather secretive smile.

"I'm not ready!"

"You are," she said. "Aren't you hungry?"

I had to admit I was. Homework does that to me, anyway.

"So? Let's go!" As usual, she drove. We didn't say too much--I was too nervous, and I think she must've sensed it--until I figured out which way she was going. Every town has its spots, and she was heading straight towards it. I couldn't believe it. But when I objected, she gave a shrug. "Don't worry," she said, smiling and looking sideways at me. "I'm just going to find a nice old wino for you."

"A wino." I raised my eyebrows.

"Well," she said. "Would you rather start with a great big football player?" She grinned. "Juicy as they are. I've sampled them."

"No," I said, trying to imagine myself dangling from a football player's neck. "But a little wimp would be nice."

She grimaced. "Most of them are too wiry."

I was still nervous. Stage fright. I sat back and watched the street lights go by, counting them to keep from being nervous. One, two, three. I had just reached twenty when she stopped the car and pointed. "There," she said quietly, as if the man could hear us with the car windows closed. "Can you sense him?"

Yes, I could, but I still looked to the place she pointed. He was a classic one, unshaved face with grey stubble of a beard, old, dirty clothes, bag clasped loosely in one wrinkled hand, staggering, pitiful--and for some reason reminded me of my grandfather, although my grandfather was certainly no wino.

I looked at Denny. She raised her eyebrows, smiled slightly, sat her head back against the rest, and closed her eyes. Right. So that's the way it is. Well, I wasn't about to back out then, much as I wanted to--not with her watching. So I put in my teeth, straightened my shoulders, walked across to the bushes beside the sidewalk and waited for him to come by.

He staggered down the sidewalk, humming a tuneless song under his breath. No, it wasn't tuneless. It was "The Stars and Stripes Forever." Ok...so I got a

patriotic drunk.

I made a small noise, trying to attract his attention. He staggered onward. I cleared my throat loudly and deliberately. he didn't notice. I wondered what I was going to have to do--tip over a garbage can? And that reminded me of something. I looked down--just as I thought. I was standing in a pile of garbage.

I wasn't surprised, considering the neighborhood. And, as I had hoped, there was a cola can. I grinned and rolled it onto the sidewalk with my foot. He stopped humming, looked at the can rolling before him, and, as I hoped, slowly tracked it back to where I was.

I was waiting. I stared at him, my eyes wide, and reached out with my mind. He went under extremely easily--which was natural enough, I guess. He approached me, reached to the dark spot where I was, and held his head cocked to one side. I bit in eagerly--I was hungry!

The blood was fantastic. it tasted like vanilla ice cream, beefsteak, and something else extremely tasty wrapped up in one. I sucked it in eagerly until I remembered that I shouldn't pull too much out of the donor. So I pinched the holes shut, told him to forget it, and sent him on his way. He went back to the sidewalk without a backwards glance and started humming again.

I went back to the car, got in, and sat back, a triumphant smile on my face. My stomach was full. "How was that, teacher?" I said.

She started up the car and went down the street. "Hmm...? Oh, I wasn't watching," she said, turning the corner to go back to campus.

I felt deflated, though I wasn't going to show it. She looked at me and grinned. "You did fine." Women! Honestly.

We went silently back to campus. I remembered thinking that I must've been more hungry than I thought, because I was starting to feel awfully good. I sunk low and placed my hands behind my head. Denny looked at me out of the corner of her eye. She kept doing it, and it struck me as funny. I laughed, and kept on giggling as she kept eyeing me, looking more and more alarmed.

"David," she said finally. "Are you alright?"

I laughed. "I feel fine!" I said happily.

"David," she said, a strange tone in her voice. "Have you drunk alcohol before?"

"Why, no," I said. "I'm a good boy. Why?" Honestly, I hadn't. I know, the statistics. Well, I had never wanted to.

"Oh, jeez," she said. "No tolerance, and the blood makes it soak in more." She fell silent.

Everything was a little distant after that. I remembered her helping me up to the room--I was awfully dizzy. She deposited me in the chair, where I must've fallen asleep. I slept solidly the whole night and woke the next morning with a splitting headache and cotton mouth. Thankfully, I didn't have a test that day.

Denny called up later to apologize. But it hadn't really bothered me, I mean, how could she know?

* * *

April 19

I went solo today. It was easy. I picked a fat guy who would never miss it. I reeled him in slick as a fish, then let him go, and he never knew that anything happened to him. What a feeling of power! It makes me feel a little guilty. Church schooling again, I guess.

I've been to church. Even though the Association claims they don't contradict the church, I'm not sure God quite approves what I'm doing, but do I have a choice? I mean, we do use our powers to benefit mankind, I guess.

I'm not seeing Heather anymore. The little witch. If ever there was good vampire bait...

I'm getting ahead of myself.

Ever since my conversion, well, I have to admit I'd been ignoring her, even though we have gone out once or twice. For one thing, I had a lot of homework, which took up three-quarters of my free time. And vampire training took up the rest. I swear, I was finding it hard to find time to sleep.

Anyway, Denny and I were sitting in my dorm room today, going over a few last points of mesmerism and mind-reading...if there are last points--it's an ongoing study process...and, I have to admit, we were getting a little wild. I was flashing her a few obscene messages, she was returning them point for point, and we were just rolling on the floor with laughter. Then a knock came on the door. I stopped laughing long enough to yell "Come in," then kept on laughing.

She came in, and I stopped. It was Heather. She looked at me, she looked at Denny, and her face grew hard, her bright-red lips pursed. "So this is how you're doing your homework," she said shrilly.

I sat up, looked at Denny, then looked at Heather. "Yes," I said, "this is how I'm doing my homework." I was getting annoyed. I didn't like what she was implying. "Heather...meet Denny. She's in my...biology class. Denny, this is Heather."

"Your girlfriend?" Denny's tone was light, but she sent, *You've got to be kidding* with her mind.

"Yes," Heather retorted. I sat there, looking at the two glare at each other. What a contrast, and yet, how similar they were. Heather was all curls and frills--her hair was carefully curled, a lacy-like shirt showed above her violet sweater, and she wore her pearl necklace and pearl earrings. Denny, however, had gone all out. Her hair was as straight as she could get it (her hair was naturally curly, she told me once), and she was wearing her chains, her black leather jacket and slacks, and her cape.

Yet they were looking at each other like two cats thinking about fighting each other over a mouse. And I was the mouse, and I didn't like it.

Heather suddenly lunged forward, and, before I could move, had slapped Denny. Denny sat in shock, then slapped back. Heather yelped and turned towards me, pouting. Denny, after her slap, sat back, watching Heather cautiously.

"Heather," I said calmly, although Denny said my voice cracked, "get out of here."

She looked at me wide-eyed, flushed. "We're through," I said. I could see tears forming, but I knew better than to soften. I could see in her mind now, and she was crying over the loss of a possession, not the loss of a boyfriend. Damn it, why couldn't I have seen that I was being used? "Go to your other boyfriends. I know you have plenty other fish on your little pearly line."

She stared at me, angry tears running down her cheeks, and, I swear to God, she flounced out of the room. I didn't know women flounced anymore. She slammed the door. I sat there looking at it, then looked at Denny.

"What did you see in her?" Denny said

"I don't know," I said softly. I felt a lot better.

* * *

April 25

Tepes was back again today. He read this diary, then nodded. "You've made a good start," he said, and he patted me on the shoulder and smiled. This time, the smile seemed friendly, even though he seemed a little lonely--and it made me feel almost like a comrade. I felt good, better then I've felt in a long time.

"It's not easy to help people who don't want to be helped," he said. "I know." I suppose he does.

Then he told me something that floored me. He stared at me intently. "Before I go, I must ask you something, although I believe I know your answer." Reading my

mind again, I suppose. "We did not tell you before, because we wished you to be used to the idea." He sighed. "The...condition is not permanent. Even I may revert back to the so-called mortal state if I eschew the blood. So I must ask you if you wish to continue in our organization. If you wish not to, I will erase all memories of us from your mind, and we will not bother you again."

So, call me a sucker. I like doing good deeds.

Oh, jeez. I just made a pun, didn't I?

After I told him I'd stay, he gave me the package he was carrying. It was my member's cape. I guess that means I've graduated, although it wasn't much longer than my novice cape.

I feel I've come a long way in accepting my new status, it being only three weeks and all. Oh, there are times when I feel rather nervous about it, but it passes. And I have Denny.

We kissed for the first time last night. I think I'm falling in love with her. I think I could spend years with her. I'd like to.

She's going to be coming home with me this weekend. I think she should meet my parents. She asked whether she should dress normally, but I told her not to worry about it. I mean, the way I figure it, why should she pretend to be something she's not?

Just the same, I don't think we'll tell my parents that we're vampires. I mean, there are limits.

- The End -

[Lorraine Anderson has collaborated with Sherlock for Fandom Directory #'s 10, 11, and 12; she wrote the stories for the cartoon strips "George and the Saint" and "Coffin Bones" (published in these volumes) about characters created by Sherlock. Two stories have appeared in LoneStar Trek, published in Houston -- "The Vice-Versa Affair in #4 and "No Feet" in #5. Three stories ("She's Who?", "Marital Problems," and "Meripopindular") have also appeared in Tardis Time Lore, published in Tucson, Arizona. Upcoming work includes a story in Julie Barrett's A Matter of Time (A Quantum Leap fanzine) and possibly a tale in the new Star Trek: Deep Space Nine / Star Trek: The Next Generation fanzine from the editors of LoneStar Trek. As if all of this weren't enough, Lorraine is also going crazy trying to finish editing her first fanzine (based upon Quantum Leap) entitled More Misadventures. For more information on this one, you may contact Lorraine at P.O. Box 463, Three Rivers, MI 49093.]

BLOOD TIES appeared on the Fox TV network in May 1991. It concerns an extended family of vampires living in Southern California. These people, who prefer to call themselves "Carpathians," are non-supernatural, a nonhuman species who have superior but not incredible strength, reflexes, and longevity (for instance, they have a relatively modest lifespan of 125 years). They appear to drink blood mainly for erotic purposes, though a reference to their ancestors in the old country gorging themselves on victims seems inconsistent with this. These vampires do eat normal food and seem to have no trouble with sunlight.

The movie centers on Harry Martin, a modern young Carpathian-American who believes in adapting to mainstream society. By contrast, Eli, the patriarch of the clan, who uses his wealth and influence to manipulate Los Angeles area politics to protect his family, takes a more conservative stance and worries about loss of his peoples' true nature through assimilation. At the farthest extreme from Harry is a vampire motorcycle gang, the Shrikes, who disdain law and revel in preying on the "inferior" human majority.

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Carter's TALES OF A VANISHING BREED originated with a story, "Vanishing Breed," which appeared in her first anthology, Curse of the Undead (Fawcett, 1970). These vampires belong to a nocturnal, extremely long-lived (perhaps immortal if not killed by violence) nonhuman species. They feed on animal blood and milk but require frequent doses of human blood for optimal health. They possess empathic perception (they "see" emotions) and thrive on strong emotion, especially sexual passion. Two-way sharing of blood with either another vampire or a human donor makes telepathic communication possible. These creatures keep a low profile, not killing human victims or otherwise making themselves conspicuous. At most, about 10,000 of them live on Earth at present. They breed seldom, so reproductive sex is unimportant to them; blood-sharing satisfies their emotional needs. Male vampires are impotent and infertile with human females. Female vampires can become pregnant by human males in rare circumstances. Roger Darvell is the product of such a union. Brought up by human adoptive parents, he remained unaware of his true nature until age forty. He has appeared in the Vampire Journal and stars in two novels, Night Changeling and Child of Twilight, now seeking a publisher. In the same universe, Nigel Jamison, who appeared in Good Guys Wear Fangs 1 as well as earlier in the present issue, stars in the unpublished novel, Sealed in Blood. Another of their race, Reynard, appeared in "Demon on the Hill" (Vampire Journal) and the novelette Payer of Tribute (Baker Street Publications). A vampire family will appear in "The Pale Hill's Side," Midnight Zoo 2,4 (1993).

WILD BRANCH

by

Margaret L. Carter

[Editor's Note: Roger and Britt are original characters created by the author, and are a part of her "Vanishing Breed" vampire universe, seen earlier in this issue in "First Date," and in GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 1 ("Incunabula"). Harry--and the bike gang--are from "Blood Ties."]

"You know, you don't *have* to go to the banquet on Saturday. Whatever the after-dinner speaker pontificates on, we're bound to have heard it before." Britt Logan plucked the pins from her flaming red-gold hair with her right hand while holding the conference program in her left.

"Of course I'll attend the confounded banquet with you." With languid pleasure, Roger Darvell watched his partner's hair, released from its dress-for-success bun, cascade down her back. His reclining position on the king-size bed gave him an excellent view, as she sat at the desk studying the brochure by lamplight. The hotel room's drapes, of course, were closed to shut out the sun. "Consider the alternative," he said, "letting you sit through it alone, an irresistible target for any middle-aged medical Casanova who wants to try out his newest line."

Britt said with a husky laugh that sent a pleasant quiver through his vitals, "Colleague, you overestimate my attractions, as usual. Is defending me against hypothetical seducers worth the ordeal I know the dinner will be for you?"

"Yes," he growled. Much as he disliked stuffy, noisy rooms and the odor and taste of mediocre hotel food (which he'd have to sample to maintain appearances, and hope his table companions weren't eating garlic-flavored salad dressing), he wouldn't leave Britt alone in that alcoholically-lubricated atmosphere. He knew how males, even fully human ones, looked at her when they thought he didn't notice.

She stretched, pulling her emerald green caftan tight across her lush breasts. "I should be more worried about *you* getting overtures from all those middle-aged female psychiatrists. That involuntary magnetism you radiate when you're hungry--"

"Nonsense, colleague, I'm perfectly capable of controlling it." In fact, since he and Britt had become lovers, more than a decade past, he'd lost all but aesthetic interest in other women.

"Yeah, right, tell me about it." She said more seriously, "Granted, you're doing better all the time. Not that you really need it. The Harvard accent alone--" She smiled at Roger's involuntary blush. "Well, what do you think hooked *me*?"

He knew his imposing height, trim build, and aquiline profile, not to mention the dash of gray in his dark hair, appealed to women. In his amoral younger days, he'd taken ruthless advantage of those assets. For all his adult life up to the age of forty, he had ensnared victims using the hypnotic power inherited from his vampire mother, without knowing its source, much less the source of his "unnatural" hunger for blood. It had been a positive relief to learn that he was only half human, that what he'd considered an abominable perversion was simply his nature, the inevitable result of dominant vampire genes. The problems of living as a human-vampire hybrid had proven quite manageable in comparison with the fear of a

mental breakdown--a fear that had led him into his profession, which had as one of its disadvantages the obligation to attend occasional conferences like this one, sponsored by UCLA. He reluctantly detoured the conversation from personal to professional. "What time have they scheduled your panel on archetypes in popular culture?"

Britt checked the program. "Saturday at two."

"I'll attend that, of course. I want to hear you read your paper."

"What on earth for? You've already torn it to shreds a dozen times." She stepped over to the luggage rack and selected a dress from her suitcase.

"You know I won't do that in public," said Roger, "and I enjoy seeing you get the recognition you deserve. As for the rest of the schedule, what have you got lined up so far?" Thanks to their blood-bond, they could divide the conference events between them without missing much, for each could telepathically "listen in" to the other's perceptions.

Britt picked up the brochure again. "Nothing tonight except the welcome-aboard cocktail party, which I'm as glad to miss as you are." She gave him an assessing glance. "We don't even have to go out to dinner. I'd be just as happy with room service--you didn't sleep well this afternoon."

"True." No sense denying it; she knew how jet lag and unfamiliar surroundings affected his sleep patterns. He had only dozed, unable to achieve the deathlike suspended animation he required for true rest. "Doesn't matter. I want to give you a decent meal; no reason you should have to adjust to me all the time. What's on for tomorrow?"

She scanned the program. "You said you wanted psychotropic drugs at ten, so I'll take childhood autism. There's a seminar on sexual harassment issues at eleven--"

"I'd better take that one, for my past sins." He spoke lightly, but not without underlying seriousness. Though he hadn't taken advantage of a patient since the night he and Britt had declared their love, the guilt remained.

"Long-term effects of child abuse for me, then," she said. "We can work out the rest later."

After choosing undergarments from the suitcase and laying them on a chair with her dress, Britt stripped off her caftan. She was tall for a human female, with slender curves and full breasts. Roger never tired of watching her, drinking in her vitality and luxuriating in her affection.

Instead of dressing right away, she sat on the bed next to him. "Don't you want some refreshment before we leave?" Unbuttoning his shirt, she skimmed her nails down his chest.

He struggled to slow the racing of his heart. "What I want is beside the point. You know if I enjoy you now, I won't feel like moving from this spot, much less taking you out to some crowded restaurant."

She leaned over him, letting her hair tickle his exposed skin. The glow of her aura went to his head like sparkling wine. "It's up to you. There's always room service."

He inhaled her delicious fragrance, untainted by any perfume. "Stop tempting me, colleague. Claude and Eloise" --Roger's full-blooded half-brother and his human mate-- "gave the place four stars, and it's an easy walk from the hotel. I'll wait for dessert, thank you."

Britt abandoned the seduction attempt and picked up her underwear. "Too bad Claude and Eloise are out of town. Oh, well, we'll catch them on our next visit."

By the time she'd dressed, then recombed her hair in a French twist, and Roger had showered and dressed, twilight was falling. He opened the drapes to contemplate the beautiful Los Angeles spring evening--as beautiful as it ever got, anyway. According to the weather report, the smog count was low today. Britt wore a mint-green satin sheath dress with a jade pendant (one of Roger's gifts) that highlighted the color of her eyes. He felt a pang of desire as he took her arm and half-regretted his decision to go out. He constantly had to fight the illogical,

selfish urge to keep her to himself. Even after all these years, he found his good fortune incredible. So few of his kind knew the blessing of a human lover who understood and wholeheartedly accepted them.

Halfway down the empty corridor to the elevator, approaching the alcove marked "Stairs," Roger felt a sudden prickle of uneasiness. Someone was watching them.

Britt sensed his alarm and "spoke" in his mind. *What's wrong, colleague?*

I don't know. I think there's somebody nearby who doesn't want to be seen.

At that moment, the door to the staircase burst open. Two black-clad young men --no, more like teen-agers--charged at Roger and Britt. One grabbed Britt, clamping a hand over her mouth to stifle a scream. The other barreled into Roger.

Instantly recovering his balance, Roger slapped aside the attacker's grasping hands. The punk, with a bestial grimace, roared a wordless challenge. One fist swung at Roger's jaw, while the other hand groped in search of a wallet.

Roger slipped away from the assault so quickly human eyes would have seen him vanish and reappear. He then grasped the thug's right arm and twisted it back.

With unexpected strength, the mugger broke free. Roger had to use all his inhuman muscular capacity to grapple with the boy. Lifting his assailant off the floor, he saw the boy's expression of predatory lust shift to--surprise? No, Roger felt him emit a stronger emotion, something like outrage. He slammed the writhing body into the wall. The boy lay there, stunned.

Meanwhile, the other young man struggled with Britt. She bit his hand, a gesture that elicited a growl of pain but didn't improve her situation. Instead, the attacker gave her an angry shake and curled his other hand around her neck.

Roger descended on them, his teeth bared and a snarl rising in his throat. The hoodlum's anger turned to confusion, then fear. Roger knew how terrifying he must look, with his eyes blazing in fury. Panicked, the mugger released Britt, jerked the gold chain from her neck, and ran for the stairs with the necklace clutched in his fist.

Roger threw his arms around Britt. The thunder of her heartbeat deafened him. Half-blinded by the crimson fog of his own rage, he barely noticed the onlookers drawn by the commotion.

Britt shoved at his chest. "I'm fine, you idiot! Don't let him get away!"

Realizing she'd suffered no worse than a few bruises, Roger obeyed. When he opened the staircase door, he heard footsteps clattering downward, several floors below. He rushed to the landing and peered over the rail. The fleeing boy threw a glance upward and quickened his pace.

Nobody to see except the criminal, who would hardly qualify as a reliable witness--Roger decided to take the risk. He leaped over the rail into the stairwell and landed lightly one flight below the mugger. The boy stopped short and stared down, his eyes wide with disbelief. Roger charged up the steps. His adrenalin-flooded muscles easily overpowered his enemy's resistance. When Roger's vision cleared, the boy lay flat on his back on the landing. Blood seeped from the back of his head, where he'd hit the concrete, but he remained conscious. His skin felt unusually cool, Roger thought, but not abnormally so, considering he was probably slipping into shock.

How would he have reacted if I'd sprouted wings and flown down to block him? Fortunately or unfortunately, the genes he'd inherited from his human father left Roger unable to perform that particular trick.

The boy stammered incoherently for a minute before he got out the words, "What are you? What the hell are you?"

Roger ignored the inconvenient question, retrieving the jade pendant and hauling the boy to his feet. Roger studied the boy's baffled face--milk-pale, in contrast to his shock of black hair, curling sloppily past his ears. Roger saw a peculiar violet tint in the aura--drugs? But the young man's scent held no suggestion of chemical taint, despite the odd, sharp odor of his blood.

The sound of footsteps in the stairwell interrupted Roger's scrutiny. He shoved his captive ahead of him, up to where a police officer waited with drawn pistol.

Back on the floor he'd come from, Roger found the other hoodlum already handcuffed, under the eye of a second officer. Leaving his captive to the Miranda ritual, Roger elbowed his way into the hotel room, where Britt sat on the bed. A hotel security guard occupied the armchair near the window.

Roger spared the man only an impatient glance. The intruder kept him from taking Britt in his arms, as he longed to do. He didn't ask whether she was all right, since he could see she wasn't seriously hurt. Her anger at the attack made the hairs at the back of his neck bristle in sympathy. He offered her the pendant he still grasped in his left hand. "I'm afraid the chain is broken."

Britt's face relaxed into a smile as she reached for it. The security guard intercepted her. "Sorry, ma'am, I expect the police will want that for evidence." At that moment, one of the officers stepped into the room. The hotel guard stood up to greet him.

"Afraid so," said the policeman. He wrapped the necklace in a handkerchief. "Officer Hernandez here," he said, shaking hands with Roger and Britt in turn. "You don't have to come down to the precinct. I'll take your statement here--if there's an office we could use?" he asked the hotel guard.

"Sure."

There goes dinner, Britt silently remarked to Roger with a wry smile.

So, while the two muggers were presumably hauled off to jail, the rest of them trooped down to a claustrophobic office, redolent of stale cigarette smoke, where Roger and Britt recited their statements into a tape recorder. Roger kept his remarks brief and selective, a precaution that came naturally after a lifetime of caution.

By the time L.A.'s finest pronounced themselves satisfied and left, Britt no longer felt like eating out. Roger insisted on placing a room service order for her meal, though she said the incident had killed her appetite. He leaned against the dresser, arms folded, watching her pace around the room. Her agitation pained him.

"On top of having the evening ruined," she grumbled, "the blasted LAPD impounded my necklace for evidence!"

Roger drew her, half-resisting, into an embrace. "They'll return it after the trial, surely," he said, "and anyway, I'll buy you another."

"Oh, Roger, sometimes you miss the point so completely! You can't replace the occasion when you gave it to me." She brushed angry tears from her eyes.

"Then we'll create a new occasion." He coaxed her to sit down on the bed, leaning back against a nest of pillows.

She kicked off her shoes and rested her head on his shoulder. "Sorry I'm acting like such a crab. You did show them, didn't you? It was almost worth the hassle, to see you deck that creep."

"Colleague, such unprofessional language." The tension in his own chest loosened as he felt her relax. "I sensed something strange about those two, though."

"Come to think of it, they weren't very well prepared, as holdup men go. They didn't have weapons."

"True." Roger hadn't stopped to think about that anomaly. "I've never heard of a barehanded mugging before."

Britt shrugged. "Maybe they're ardent devotees of gun control."

But Roger couldn't dismiss the point so lightly. "They hardly needed weapons, actually. They were extremely strong. Few ordinary men would have been able to overpower them." He recalled the emotions he'd sensed from his assailants. "They were more than surprised when I bested them--they acted as if they couldn't believe it. And I noticed a peculiar tinge in their auras."

A knock at the door interrupted him. Britt's dinner arrived, with a bottle of burgundy, plus an order of steak tartare for Roger. He forced himself to consume the raw meat to take the edge off his hunger. The fight had left him overstimulated; he feared making excessive demands on Britt. The wine helped a little, too, though alcohol had only marginal effect on his nonhuman metabolism.

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By the time they placed the ravaged tray outside the door, they'd both calmed down. Britt voiced one last complaint. "You know what else this means, of course? We'll probably have to fly back here for the trial. And what will they get? Six months if we're lucky."

"That's an all too familiar phenomenon," said Roger. As psychiatrists, they testified as expert witnesses often enough to be well acquainted with the vagaries of American justice. "I don't want to discuss it any more. Shall we relax and enjoy what's left of the night?"

"I second that." With a cheerfully lecherous grin, Britt peeled off her dress. He helped her finish undressing, while she fumbled with his clothes in a confusion of buttons and buckles. Several minutes later they lay naked on the king-size bed.

For the first time since driving to Baltimore-Washington Airport early that morning, Roger completely relaxed. He captured Britt's eager mouth in a kiss that refreshed him like cool spring water after hours of thirst. Her body, pressed against his, pulsed with energy. Every inch of his skin felt aflame where hers touched it. Her hands and mouth explored as ardently as his. Though his desire centered on the taste of her blood, his half-human parentage and entirely human upbringing gave him a degree of genital sensitivity that full-blooded male vampires lacked. Her intimate caresses delighted him, and he enjoyed pleasing her in that way as far as his limitations allowed.

When she convulsed in ecstasy from his unerring touch, guided by his empathic sharing of her sensations, he nipped the curve of her throat. His tongue lapped the trickle of blood, making her shiver with pleasure. As always, that first taste made his head spin with breathless anticipation.

Aching with love for her, he pulled back to give them both a moment of equilibrium. A verse popped into his mind, recollected from the last time he'd attended early service at Britt's Episcopal parish instead of his own Roman Catholic church. "My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you," he murmured into her sweetly-scented hair, "as in a barren and dry land where there is no water."

"Quoting the Psalms?" said Britt with a shaky laugh. "Oh, Roger, that's blasphemous!"

"I won't be mentioning it in confession," he said. "I use those words because I don't have any of my own to express what you mean to me. If He made me with this need, He made you to fulfill it. So how can it be a sin?"

He kissed her tears away before he returned to feasting upon her life.

* * *

The next morning at nine, Roger watched Britt eat breakfast in the hotel coffee shop, while he sipped black coffee and tried to ignore his incipient headache. Since he couldn't sleep at night unless totally exhausted, he'd managed only three and a half hours of solid rest. Though his normal office hours made him used to falling asleep at five A.M. and waking up at eight thirty, he'd never learned to like it.

A masculine voice mentioning his name drew his attention to the cash register across the room. A dark-haired man who appeared to be in his thirties glanced toward their table just as Roger looked up. To Roger's dismay, the man thanked the hostess and headed in their direction.

Britt followed Roger's gaze and noted the source of his annoyance. "Looks like we've got company. One of our medical associates, maybe?"

The intruder wasn't wearing a conference name tag. He said, "Dr. Darvell? Dr. Logan? Mind if I talk to you for a minute?" Without waiting for an answer, he pulled up a chair and tossed a business card on the table. Harry Martin, Long Beach *Post-Gazette*. He wore an unbuttoned suit jacket with a plum-colored tie. He had a trim jogger's build, and his thick, dark brown hair tumbled over his forehead in rakish disorder. Roger didn't care for the appreciative way Britt looked him

over.

"If it's about that incident last night," Roger said, "I hardly consider it newsworthy enough to waste your time. We have no comment. And I assure you, I can repeat 'No comment' longer than you'll care to sit and listen to it."

"It is about the mugging." Martin glanced around and lowered his voice. "But it's not for my paper. Actually, it's off the record and personal." Extracting a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket, he said, "Is this the smoking section?"

"Not at this table, it isn't," Roger said. The traces of tobacco fumes clinging to the man's clothes were bad enough. "Mr. Martin, if you aren't after a story, what do you want?"

Looking slightly embarrassed, the reporter put the cigarette pack away. "It's family business. Much as I hate to admit it, those two are distant cousins of mine." He stared speculatively at Roger. "You rammed Butch into a wall. I wouldn't have believed anybody could do that."

"Butch?" said Britt with an incredulous smile. "That juvenile delinquent with the young Elvis haircut is a Butch?"

"Short for Butcher-Bird." Martin shrugged. "Hey, don't look at me, I didn't name him." He leaned his elbows on the table. "Let me cut right to it--I'm asking you not to press charges."

"What?" Roger held his voice to a cold whisper, for fear of losing control.

"Consider the pragmatic aspects. If you come back here in a couple of months to testify against Butch and Slade, you'll be wasting time and money. They'll never spend a day in jail. If you don't show, the case will collapse, and we'll all come out ahead."

The man's incredible nerve left Roger speechless for a minute. Britt said, "Why are you so sure they won't be convicted?"

"Grim experience," Martin said. "Hell, I don't like it any better than you do. I've been trying for years to get Butch and his gang--they call themselves the Shrikes -- to pay for their fun. But Eli Chalarin's lawyer bailed them out first thing this morning, and it'll end up the same as always. The last time they actually got arrested, it was for snatching an old lady's purse and breaking her arm. Eli got them off clean. Compared to that, this is nothing."

"Nothing?" Roger snarled.

Britt patted his hand. "Who is Eli Chalarin?"

"Their uncle, head of the clan," Martin said. "Fighting him is a waste of energy. He buys juries the way you buy those tailored suits." He glanced at Roger. "Eli believes corruption is the single untapped source of pure energy left on this planet. His motto is, 'Corruption empowers, and absolute corruption empowers absolutely.' So you might as well forget the whole thing."

"Damned if we will," said Roger. Every sentence made him more angry and determined.

Martin spread his hands in a gesture of appeal. "I can see I'm going about this all wrong. I know it's not trivial to you, but to them, it is. The incident was an initiation rite for Slade--do something daring and stupid, to wit, rob somebody inside a luxury hotel, to prove his worth. Think of it as a juvenile prank. Eli will pay whatever damages you ask, within reason, if you'll drop it."

"This Eli Chalarin sent you here to bribe us?" Roger sipped his cooling coffee. It tasted bitter.

Martin shrugged again. "Let's say he dropped some broad hints. There are good reasons why our family can't afford publicity, reasons I can't discuss."

Roger stood up and stared into Martin's eyes. "Tell him we intend to prosecute to the full extent of the law." He impaled the reporter with his gaze, reinforcing the statement with a hypnotic shove. To his surprise, Martin gazed back, unaffected, an odd shimmer in his aura.

"What are you trying to do, Doctor?" Shaking his head, he got up. "There's something about you... Well, keep my card, and call if you have any questions. Hope you'll change your mind." He walked out.

Britt watched him until he disappeared into the lobby before she spoke. "He's kind of cute. I wonder what that was all about."

Britt's amusement annoyed Roger; he wanted her to share his outrage. "Arrogant riffraff who think they're above the law--" His anger faded as he contemplated Martin's easy resistance to his mesmeric power. "I noticed something odd in his aura, the same violet band those two hooligans displayed. A family trait, perhaps?"

"What I'd like to find out," said Britt, toying with the remains of her omelet, "is who, exactly, Eli Chalarin is. The local godfather? Too bad Claude isn't in town; he might know."

"I could call Valpa," Roger said. "He certainly ought to know, if this 'godfather' is prominent in the Long Beach area." Dr. Valpa, one of the elders of Roger's people, taught history at a Los Angeles college.

"Great idea," said Britt. "We have some time before the sessions start at ten; let's do it."

A few minutes later, in the elevator, she said, "I don't suppose there's any chance that whatever we learn will change your mind about prosecuting?"

"Don't be silly, colleague. Do *you* want to cave in to that kind of pressure?"

"Of course not, but Mr. Martin has a point--it'll probably mean a lot of hassle for nothing."

A call to Valpa's home got nothing but an answering machine. Roger had better luck in phoning the university. The call was transferred to the history department, then to Valpa's office, and the professor picked it up on the second ring.

"Roger, my dear boy. I trust you're well? What has lured you away from the shores of the Chesapeake Bay?"

Roger pictured Valpa's leonine mane of white hair, which reinforced the deceptive image of a venerable, harmless scholar. "Medical conference."

"And is your lovely lady with you?"

Britt, overhearing, gave Roger a teasing smile. She knew he never willingly allowed Valpa within striking distance of her. Roger distrusted the old vampire's millennia of experience in seduction, despite the nominal "no trespassing" rule their people followed.

"Yes, she is," Roger said. "This isn't a social call, sir. I'm hoping you can provide a bit of information." He summarized the attack and its aftermath. "Who the blazes is Eli Chalarin?"

"Ostensibly a developer. An extremely wealthy one, with countless friends among local politicians." Valpa fell silent for a moment. "He heads a large extended family, whose forebears emigrated from the Carpathian region three or four generations ago. Last year they were implicated in a peculiar episode. The exsanguinated corpses of a team of vampire hunters were washed up on the shore in Long Beach. These--persons--had been observed harassing members of Chalarin's family. However, no arrests were made."

"Vampire hunters?" Roger sat up straight. "Is there any chance--any possibility they were right? Is Chalarin--?"

"Not to my knowledge," Valpa said. "He would have to be a renegade, and even so, I would probably be aware of him." Los Angeles County was Valpa's territory; there was little chance any other vampire could prowl there without his knowledge. "Eli Chalarin doesn't exhibit a renegade's typical behavior. He's too disciplined, too solidly established. Besides, as I said, the family has been a fixture here since before the turn of the century. No, lad, the victims of that murder last year were simply crackpots."

"A red herring, then."

Valpa chuckled. "Precisely. They never took any notice of our own people; they spent all their time persecuting Chalarin's relatives--presumptive evidence that they didn't know what they were doing."

Roger ended the conversation with thanks and stared at the curtained window of the hotel room.

"So," Britt said, "he confirms what Martin told us. Eli Chalarin is a power in this county. Sure you still want to mess with a criminal prosecution?"

"Of course," Roger said. He knew he was being stubborn, but the idea of collusion with someone like Chalarin infuriated him. "Granted, we're probably wasting our time. But it's a matter of principle."

"If that's the way you feel, colleague, I'm with you." Britt put on her pantsuit jacket and collected her purse and briefcase. "Now let's forget it for the rest of the weekend. We don't want to be late for the seminars."

* * *

At noon, after the two morning sessions, Roger went up to the room for a nap. While he knew he wouldn't get a decent rest in only an hour, it would be better than nothing. At the back of his mind, he sensed Britt strolling out through the lobby in search of fast food for lunch. Her constant empathic presence helped him endure the ordeal of travel; when he attended these things alone, as he occasionally had to if only to give Britt a rest from his demands, he felt cast adrift. Being out of telepathic range from her affected him like a foretaste of death.

He dozed off, comforted by her mental touch, though tenuous and wordless.

A silent cry jolted him awake.

Britt! What's wrong?

His probe contacted a blank wall. Panic welled up to choke him, though his rational side knew she was only stunned. He drew deep breaths and forced his heartbeat to decelerate. Already he sensed Britt's returning awareness, fuzzy and intermittent.

While he scrambled into the shoes and shirt he'd taken off when he'd lain down, he continued reaching for her. At last he felt her response, like an immaterial handclasp.

Roger? Stupid of me to get caught like that.

Where are you?

On a motorcycle, I think, she answered. *Still dizzy. Not a chance of jumping off and making a run for it--I can hardly keep my balance.*

Conserve your strength. I'll find you.

How, though? He had no car, and with every minute, Britt's captors fled farther from the hotel.

Butch has me, she told him, her thoughts stronger now. *And there are two other bikes, one on either side. Buddies of his, I guess--all dressed in black. If I tried to escape, they could block me instantly.*

Don't even think of trying it. This time they might be armed. Roger's biofeedback exercises stilled some of his terror for Britt. Logically, he realized, Butch must not intend immediate violence. Killing her on the spot would have been simpler than kidnapping her. So for the moment she was safe.

A sudden inspiration sent Roger in search of Harry Martin's card. To Roger's relief, his phone call to the *Post-Gazette* office located the reporter.

"This is Dr. Darvell," he said without preliminary courtesies. "Those juvenile delinquents of yours have Dr. Logan. I can find them, but I want you to help me--with transportation, among other things."

"What do you mean, you can find them? They phone you with a ransom demand or something?"

"Not exactly. I don't have time to go into details--are you coming?"

"Why not the police?"

"Because," Roger said, "the authorities might not believe my information's reliable. And because I assume you have some minimal influence over your cousins."

Martin answered that with a derisive snort.

Roger continued, "Also, if I find them on my own, I will probably kill them."

"You've convinced me," said the reporter. "I'll pick you up in front of the hotel in twenty minutes."

Putting on his polarized sunglasses, Roger hurried downstairs to fume for twenty minutes until Martin showed up. The reporter drove a battered Cadillac with improbably extravagant fins. The car was still rolling when Roger leaped in and

slammed the door. "Head southwest," he ordered.

"Mind telling me where we're going?" Martin asked.

"I don't know the destination," said Roger. "I can only give directions as we go along."

Martin gave him a dubious look. "Okay, whatever. Next question--what, exactly, happened to Dr. Logan? Can you answer that one?"

Roger paused to consult Britt, who was fairly alert by now. "She was walking along the street, looking for a place to eat lunch, when Butch and two of his gang jumped her from an alley. They're taking her toward the waterfront."

"How do you know? ESP?"

Roger decided it would do no harm to answer Martin's sarcastic question seriously. "Yes, in a sense. Britt and I have a special bond."

Strangely, Martin didn't seem to disbelieve him. "She means a heck of a lot to you, doesn't she?"

"She is my life." Embarrassed at revealing his emotions to a stranger, Roger stared out the window for a couple of minutes. Through Britt's eyes, he saw the trio of motorcycles turn off the road and screech to a stop. "They've arrived. It's a large, neglected-looking structure near the docks."

"Great, I know where we're going. It's an abandoned warehouse, one of their hangouts." Martin accelerated an additional ten miles per hour. "Damn it, I wonder what got into Butch? This isn't his usual style."

"Perhaps he wants her as leverage," Roger said, "to persuade me to drop the charges." If so, his own obstinacy had put Britt in danger. He felt sick with guilt.

Britt's mental voice interrupted him. *Don't start that, colleague. I'm fine, if you don't count a pounding headache. They've tied me to a chair. So far, there are just the three of them.*

Roger found that the nails of his right hand were digging into the armrest. He struggled to contain his mounting anger. He couldn't free Britt if he lost control.

Shortly the car turned off the freeway into a commercial area of Long Beach. Again Britt "spoke" to Roger. *Dr. Valpa was wrong. They **are** vampires, of some sort--not like your kind, or you would have known. But **some** kind. Butch has been taunting one of his boys, daring him to bite me, then changing his mind. I can tell they mean it. I've seen their fangs.*

Roger glanced speculatively at Martin. So that accounted for the oddities he'd noticed. Yet the news generated more questions than it explained. These "vampires" were indeed different from his own race; for one thing, adults of Roger's kind didn't have fangs, relying on razor-sharp but human-looking incisors. And Harry Martin didn't seem bothered by the midday sun. What relation, if any, did Chalarin's clan bear to Roger's people?

The car slowed to a crawl through a dingy industrial district, many of the buildings deserted, with their paint flaking in the Southern California sun. Finally Martin drove into an alley between two warehouses, partly concealing the car. "It's right up the street. Now what? We can't just charge in; they might hurt your friend."

"Damn." Sheltered in the shade of the deserted building, Roger thought about the problem.

Britt suggested, *Why don't I try to distract them? There are still only three. I'm sure I can even the odds for you.*

Though his automatic response was to order her not to risk herself in any way, he stifled it. He knew how she felt about being "protected." He passed the message to Martin, who led the way toward the Shrikes' hideout.

The two men approached at an angle, careful to keep out of the direct line of sight of the big double doors of the abandoned warehouse. No lookout was posted in front, though, and the doors were shut. Roger and Martin crept to the back of the building. "Now what?" the reporter whispered.

"Wait."

Through their link, Roger "heard" Britt shout at her captors, "Hey, you!

Butch, or whatever you call yourself!"

The clamor of the three youths' horseplay faded. "Yes, ma'am? What can I do for you?" The smirk in that voice made Roger yearn to twist the boy's head off.

"Don't you have a bathroom around here?"

Through Britt's eyes, Roger saw Butch exchange sly smiles with his lieutenants. "Yes, ma'am, I guess we could manage that." He produced a pocket knife to cut the cords binding Britt's legs and wrists. "I'm sure a lady doctor like you is too smart to try anything that might annoy me. You wouldn't like me when I'm annoyed."

"Kid, I already don't like you."

Butch gripped a handful of Britt's hair and jerked her head back. "Rude, very rude." Roger, listening, had to swallow a roar of outrage. Butch hustled Britt toward a small door in one corner of the barn-like structure. The two other boys fell in on either side.

Once the bathroom door closed behind her, Britt rubbed her wrists. *As tight as those ropes were, the circulation in my hands may be permanently atrophied.*

Roger asked, *Any chance of escape that way, colleague?*

Britt examined the closet-size cell and rust-streaked fixtures with a wry smile. *No window. They aren't that conveniently stupid. I'll do my best to throw Butch and company off guard. You get ready to break in. The doors are barred, but I'm sure you can handle it.*

When Britt emerged from the washroom, Butch's henchmen, one cadaverous, the other huskier, both with dark, wavy hair, stepped toward her with coils of fresh rope. Butch said, "I wonder if it's time to contact your friend, the other doc. What do you think, will he be upset enough to start bargaining?"

Ignoring the question, Britt smiled at him and said, "You don't have to tie me up again. We can't have nearly so much fun that way."

"Fun?" Butch stared at her with his arms folded, suspicious but apparently willing to be amused by her game.

"Oh, yes. I *like* vampires. In fact, I'm extremely fond of vampires. You don't have to hogtie me to get a taste of my blood."

Roger and his companion sidled around to the front of the warehouse, ready to charge the doors.

Butch leered at Britt. "Sure, I'll bet. I have to hand it to you, lady doctor, that's one of the weirdest lines I ever heard."

"Fact," she said. "I've seen every Dracula film Christopher Lee made. I just love those blatantly phallic fangs." She struck a seductive pose, neck arched, hands linked behind her head.

"Now," Roger whispered, removing his sunglasses. If it hadn't been for the danger, he could have enjoyed listening to Britt's act.

Simultaneously, he and the reporter lunged against the crack between the doors. The bar on the inside snapped under the force of the blow. Roger's eyes adjusted to the dim interior almost at once. He saw a vast room, unfurnished except for a few wooden chairs and a row of air mattresses, leaving plenty of room to maneuver. The two underlings leaped to attack. In the background, Butch grabbed Britt. Her nails raked his cheek.

He howled and relaxed his grip enough to slap her. Roger mentally recorded the insult to Butch's account, meanwhile keeping most of his attention on the young vampire who grappled with him. The youth's strength, though inhumanly great, didn't equal Roger's. Roger threw him to the floor, raked talon-sharp nails across his throat, and followed up with a knockout blow to the temple.

Whirling around, he saw Martin locked in combat with the other boy. The two of them rolled on the floor, teeth bared, growling like a pair of mad dogs. When the boy came out on top, Roger grabbed his shoulders and tore him off Martin's prostrate form. Roger shook the youth like a rat, then held him upright while the reporter clipped him on the jaw. Roger tossed the boy on top of his unconscious ally.

Across the room, Butch held Britt with her arms twisted behind her. "You hurt me, doc," he said to Roger. "That wasn't very nice at all. And you tried to get

me sent to jail. My Uncle Eli didn't like that. But you wouldn't listen, would you? Now maybe I'll claim a little compensation from her." He bared his fangs and feinted at Britt's neck. She didn't flinch.

Martin took a couple of strides toward the pair. "Butch, you've gone too far this time. Eli won't protect you if you do anything stupid to this woman."

"Yeah, says who? You?"

"He'll listen to me this time," said Martin. "I'll make sure of that."

"Don't count on it. He's not a wimp like you. He agrees with me, her kind are put on earth to feed us."

Roger glided forward inch by inch, gnawing on various unlikely ruses for getting at Butch without endangering Britt. The racing of his heart made rational thought almost impossible.

Britt looked over her shoulder at Butch and said in a drawl designed to irritate, "You know, as a vampire, you just don't measure up. Where did you get those corny lines? And those black outfits--so melodramatic."

"Shut up, cow!"

"Not to mention the fangs. Give me a break, you look as if you're wearing a plastic Halloween mask!"

Howling in fury, Butch shifted his grip to her shoulders and started to spin her around to face him. With a lightheaded now-or-never feeling, Roger hurtled into Butch. The impact knocked the punk away from Britt, who rolled onto the nearby air mattresses. Butch growled and went for Roger's throat. Snarling in reply, Roger flung an arm up to block the attack. The boy's fangs ripped his sleeve.

At the same moment, Martin sprang forward to tackle Butch's legs. Butch collapsed under the weight of both men. For a few seconds all three writhed in a confused heap. Then Roger and Martin each managed to pin one of Butch's arms.

Panting, the boy glared up at them. "Damn you to hell, Harry! Where do you get off, taking *their* side? They're just food!"

A scarlet mist gathered before Roger's eyes. He longed to rip out the boy's throat and watch him bleed--show *him* how it felt to be a victim. Only Britt's soothing presence in Roger's mind cooled his rage enough to keep him from lashing out.

Martin cast a quick glance at Roger. "Food? Not this one. Now you listen, cousin, and listen good. If you come within a mile of these people, you'll answer to me. And good old Uncle Eli won't have a thing to say about it."

"Ooh, I'm real scared." But Roger sensed that behind the sneer, Butch took the threat seriously and would back off.

"And just in case--" Martin gave Butch an efficient blow to the head to stun him. "Let's get out of here, Doctor."

Britt stumbled to Roger's side, and they shared a brief, intense embrace. "My hero."

On the way to the car, Roger said, "Colleague, I could almost think you enjoyed that."

"Aside from getting knocked down and tied up, I almost did." She added with a gloating smile, "You can't deny it was fun to watch those comic-book vampires get hammered."

Opening the back door of the Cadillac for them, Martin visibly winced. "I don't like that word. Too many unpleasant associations. We prefer to call ourselves Carpathian-Americans."

Euphemisms and rationalization! Roger thought. "Your young friends in there," he said, "*are* unpleasant. Their kind give the whole--clan--a bad name. Why do the rest of you put up with them?"

Martin sighed. "I've told Eli the same thing over and over. But considering the persecution in the old country, I can almost understand them. After all, they are a branch of my family tree, even if they're a wild growth--so to speak." He started the motor and backed into the street.

Britt silently asked, *What do you think, colleague? Are they a branch of yours, too?*

None we've ever heard of. I sincerely hope not.

* * *

Saturday night after the banquet, Harry Martin joined Roger and Britt for a brandy in their hotel room. "Isn't it about time you came clean?" he said, twirling his glass and gazing out the window at the lights of downtown Los Angeles. "I watched how you handled those guys at the warehouse. You're no more human than I am."

Roger shoved aside his ingrained defensive reaction. Martin's knowledge couldn't endanger him, because the reporter was in an equally vulnerable position. "Technically, no. My father was human."

Martin's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "No kidding? And Eli calls *me* a 'damned assimilationist'! You're stronger than we are, and I saw how you reacted to the sun--but you're half human?"

"We have other differences, too," Roger said. The discussion that followed brought out several--Martin's people had a decreased need for blood and the ability to take nourishment from normal food; their lifespan wasn't much longer than the human maximum; they bred with almost human fecundity, instead of being restricted to infrequent estrus periods.

"It sounds to me," Britt remarked, "as if your family has evolved into a more nearly human condition, for camouflage and greater adaptability."

Martin laughed. "Some of my relatives would take offense at that 'nearly human.'"

"What does it mean, though?" said Roger. "Could your clan be a branch that split off from our main line of development five or ten thousand years ago? Perhaps you descend from human ancestors you've lost the memory of."

"Interesting theory," said Martin. "We should get a committee together to discuss it."

Britt laughed at that image. Roger shared her amusement; his kind were solitary predators, unlike Martin's gregarious relatives. "That may take some persuasion," he explained to the reporter. "My people don't run in packs. No doubt your race and mine have much to learn from each other." Imagining Valpa and the other old ones face-to-face with Martin's "godfather" brought a wry smile to his lips.

"Speaking of packs, what about Butch and his gang?" said Britt.

Roger heaved a resigned sigh and sipped his brandy. "Much as I hate to admit it, Mr. Martin, you were right all along. We *can't* afford publicity. Risking exposure for your people would indirectly endanger mine, too. We won't pursue the case."

"Thanks." Martin looked visibly relieved. "Eli will compensate you financially--and don't argue, damn it, this is simple fairness, not a bribe."

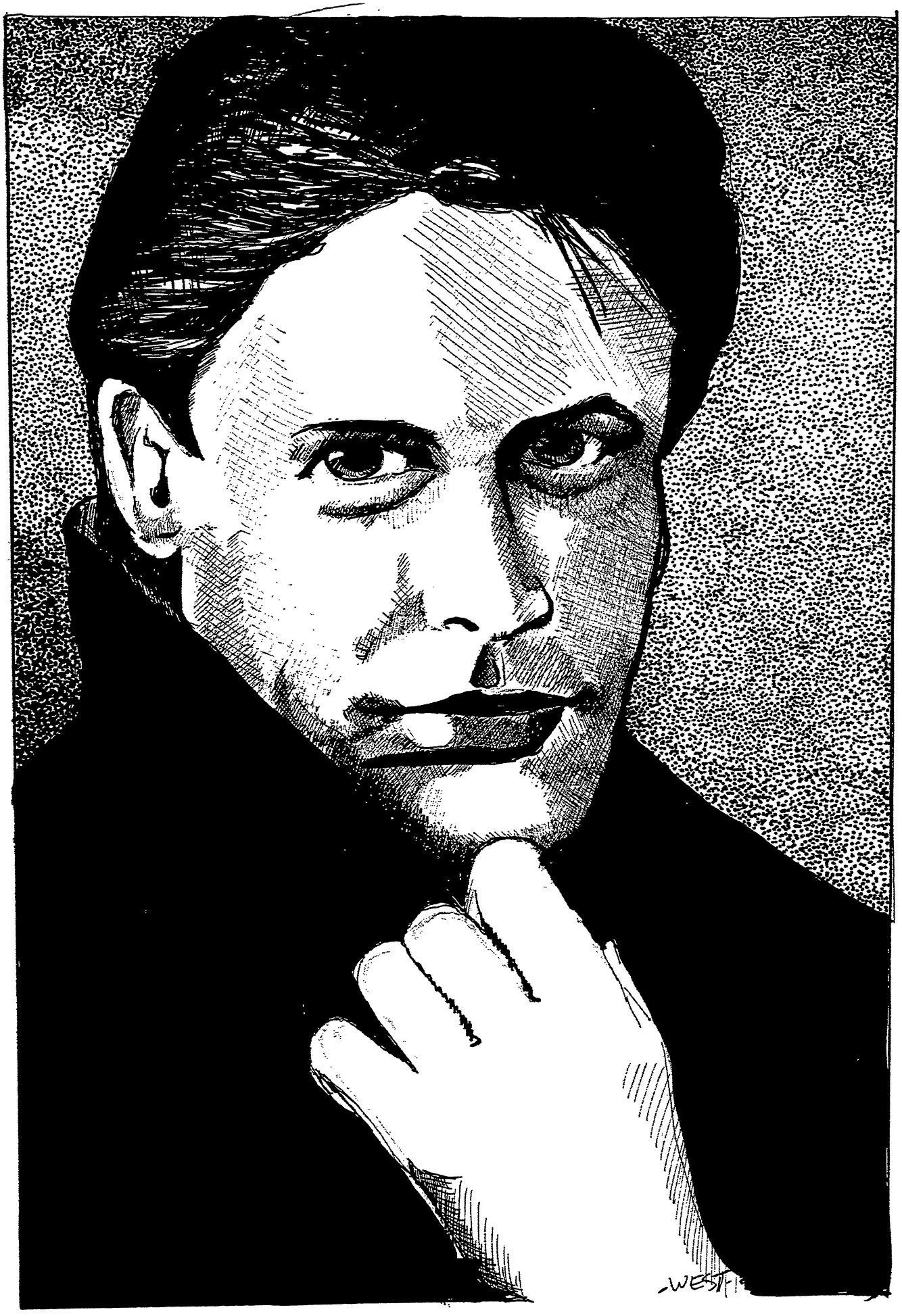
Roger still seethed with anger at the memory of Butch's claws on Britt. "If your elders can't discipline those bloodthirsty cubs, I can introduce you to one or two people who'd be delighted to whip them into shape."

Martin shook his head. "I've spoken to Eli, and the gang will be curbed, don't worry about that. I won't let him slide out of it this time. Less than a century ago, most of us lived in caves and got our dinner by leaping on victims out of trees. But that was the old country. We're trying to become civilized." He refilled his glass. "Even if some of us have farther to go than others."

"Civilized?" Raising his own glass, Roger felt Britt's tolerant amusement at his residual anger. "I'll drink to that."

- The End -

[The first story in the Vanishing Breed universe, simply entitled "Vanishing Breed," is being professionally published by Baen Books in the anthology Vampires in Space: Science Fiction Vampire Stories. It is due to appear in the fall or winter of 1994, and is by the author's husband, Leslie Carter.]


-WEST

HEALER

by

Cheryl Connors

It seemed to Nick as if he'd spent most of his long life like this. Standing over a corpse in some stinking dark alley. At least this time he didn't feel a heavy tide of guilt. This time it wasn't his fault.

Nick knelt at the dead man's side, careful not to rest his knees in the pool of blood spreading around the body, trying to keep his objectivity. He reminded himself he was no longer a killer. He was a policeman now. Leaning over a warm corpse was a part of his job. He could handle it.

A fly landed in the blood by his knee. His intentions forgotten, Nick's eyes traced its movements, his mouth suddenly dry. His muscles tensed in a sudden spasm of rebellion against his latest bout of prolonged abstinence. He was hungry tonight. Very hungry. The protein drink Jack had him on did little to ease the unnatural craving that was burning along his nerves.

The detective felt the usual reaction to his need, to the proximity of blood; his darker side thirsted and an awful lust swelled in him. He ached to change, let his tongue slide over ready fangs, feel the warm flesh of a human between his hands. Even the cooling blood dripping to the ground was an enticement. So easy just to dip his fingers in the redness there, bring it to his lips. His hand reached down. So easy.

Horror brought Nick upright. Blind and deaf to anything but his internal struggle, he jumped when a concerned voice behind him asked, "What happened here?"

Turning with startling speed, Nick felt himself flush when he saw his questioner was a priest. He took out his badge and answered, feeling oddly defensive, "It's all right. I'm Detective Knight. LAPD. You are?"

"Father Gregory, from All Saints Church. I heard a cry for help on my way back to the rectory."

It must have been the same call that had drawn Nick down the alley. After the movie he strayed into out of boredom was over, he'd been prowling the busy streets, trying to drown his loneliness in the restless sea of humans. Nick watched in silence as the thin, elderly priest knelt in the dirt, feeling for a pulse. Shaking his head in obvious regret, Father Gregory removed a vial from a coat pocket, beginning to mutter under his breath.

Nick caught a few of the words. Last rites. Equally reluctant to disturb the priest and to leave the crime scene, the detective finally raced down to the main street. Darting into a drug store, he snagged a clerk, requesting her to summon assistance. As she lifted the receiver, Nick nodded his thanks and raced back to the alley.

He hadn't been gone above three minutes. Approaching the priest who still knelt on the filthy ground, Nick stopped in shock, his heart slamming against his chest. For the dead had risen again. The former corpse was sitting propped against the wall, talking to Father Gregory.

* * *

Schanke grabbed another jelly doughnut from the coffee table, giving it a guilty look before stuffing half of it into his mouth. Between chews, he mumbled, "My wife's gonna kill me if I ruin my dinner."

Nick affected an expression of shock. "You? Lose your appetite? No way!"

"Heard you met Lazarus on your night off," Schanke retaliated, his dark eyes amused. "Jeff told me about it this morning when I got in."

Nick's eyes glittered in annoyance, as he mentally cursed the office grapevine. "Seems that way."

Schanke shrugged one shoulder in disbelief. "Right. Come on, Nick, I guess you just can't admit you made a mistake. What were you doing in that neighborhood anyway?"

Nick felt a surge of anger at his partner's sarcastic tone, and forced his hands to unclench. Mastering his temper, the vampire felt a flash of annoyance for letting the man get under his skin. It wasn't a safe reaction. Not for him. Not for Schanke. Once again, Nick regretted allowing the captain to talk him into a partnership with this particular human. Schanke's rough edges rubbed him the wrong way all too often. The only good thing about the arrangement was that his partner normally worked the day shift. *And*, Nick added to himself, *The truth is, Schanke's a damn sharp cop*. He cleared his throat and tried to answer lightly, "Went to see a foreign movie. It was pretty awful. Just like the neighborhood."

"Never could get into sub-titles myself." Schanke pulled out his notebook. "Let's get started. We do have other cases to work on. You know, ones with people who are really, truly dead."

Schanke's tone grew even more mocking and Nick winced. Unable to drop it, he said, "Look, the guy had gone on to meet his maker. Believe me. I know enough of death to recognize it when I see it."

Schanke slid behind his overflowing desk and looked up at his partner in surprise. "Okay, so you're telling me you left a dead guy with a priest. Then when you got back the corpse was up and talking? How much did you have to drink last night, Nick?"

"Nothing! I'm serious. When I got back, the victim was complaining to the priest that his best friend had stabbed him for his whiskey bottle, then ran. I called for an ambulance and put in a APB on the victim's 'friend'. Father Gregory told me the victim started to move when he began the last..." Nick was cut off before he could finish.

"Now that's interesting. You did say Father Gregory?"

"Yeah, so? You know him?"

"Of All Saints?"

Getting impatient, Nick grated, "Yes."

His partner shook his head slowly. "Weird, definitely weird."

Resisting the urge to grab Schanke and shake him until his teeth rattled, Nick almost growled, "Tell me!"

"Father Gregory. My brother in-law's second cousin's niece went to him for her arthritis. Some people think he's a healer."

Nick felt dazed. "Does the church recognize him as legit?"

"Course not," Schanke's tone was chiding. "The church dislikes miracle workers. Makes 'em nervous. Besides, Father Gregory's still alive. Maybe they'll think about canonizing him in a century or two."

The chunky detective started pushing stacks of paper around on his desk to clear a space. Nick managed to grab a half-filled coffee cup before his partner dumped it on himself. Schanke grunted his thanks. "Now can I please brief you? Maybe I can actually get home at a reasonable hour tonight."

"Just one more thing. Do you think it's true? About Father Gregory, I mean?"

The seated man looked thoughtful, then shrugged. "Anything's possible. Someday, my friend, when you've seen as much as I have, you'll realize it's a very weird world out there."

Nick kept an amused look off his face only with an effort. If his oh-so experienced partner only knew how inexperienced Nick considered him, he wouldn't be

quite so smug. The vampire took a deep breath, consciously suppressing his excitement. After all these years, all his ruined hopes, maybe this time he'd found a path back from damnation.

* * *

"So, what do you think?"

Jack finished opening the metal shades sealing the apartment windows, taking a deep breath of the cool night air before turning to study Nick's attire. He grinned. "I think you look like a refuge from a forties spy movie."

Sighing, Nick slipped off the fedora, giving it a rueful look. "And here I thought I looked like Bogart."

"Lose the trenchcoat while you're at it." The doctor pulled on his sweater as he spoke.

"It's not a trenchcoat," Nick pointed out with dignity. "It's a raincoat."

"Whatever." Jack's grin grew wider. "I know why you want to go incognito, but you'll just stand out in that outfit. Wear a suit-jacket, look reasonably pious and you'll blend right in. Trust me." Jack spared a glance at his watch. "We gotta get a move on or we'll miss the beginning."

Poking around his closet, Nick found a charcoal jacket. Shrugging into it, he said, "Thanks for coming with me."

"No sweat. I've never seen a faith-healer before." Seeing that the lean detective was ready, Jack headed to the door, stopping when he felt a light touch on his arm.

"Do you think Father Gregory is for real? Do you think he could help me?"

"I don't know." Knowing the demons driving his friend, Jack didn't want to douse the hope kindling in Nick's eyes, but neither did he care to lie. He answered slowly, "I can't say I've ever believed in such things." Brightening, the doctor added, "But then again, I never believed in vampires either."

The strained look on Nick's face eased, and he gave Jack an impish smile. "And as I remember, I had to do some fairly drastic work to convince you I wasn't crazy. Or joking."

The doctor didn't return the smile, remembering. "You changed my entire world that night. You changed everything."

Tilting his head, worried by Jack's odd expression, Nick asked, "Should I say I'm sorry?"

"No." Jack met his friend's eyes. "I'm glad you took a chance. I'm glad you decided to trust me. It's been..."

"Interesting?" Nick finished for him.

"Definitely." Jack, wanting to change the subject, lifted his wrist to check the time again. "Come on. We're running behind."

Nick bowed him into the elevator. "After you."

* * *

The community center's basement smelled of old dirt and mold reigning uncontested. Nick wrinkled his nose in distaste as he passed through the doorway and into the tiled main room. Rows of folding chairs were filled with people, an anticipatory humming making the room seem more crowded than it was. The room was dotted here and there with wheelchairs.

Pushing their way through the cluster of people in the aisle, Nick and Jack found empty seats along the back and sat down. Looking around, the detective noted the eagerness, the need on the faces around him, and felt his stomach turn over. He knew that look, knew that fear with an intimacy that touched him with an ancient grief. It was just such a fear that had driven him to Lacroix. Only Nick hadn't known until far too late just how much he'd lost by accepting the vampire's dark gift.

Annoyed at lapsing into such useless reminiscing, Nick shook himself mentally,

and took another look around the room. A middle-aged couple were seated together nearby, their hands interwoven, an expression of fierce hope on both their faces. Nick felt a touch of shame. So much desperation, so much pain. What right had he to come here? He'd freely chosen the path of his own destruction. What right had he to ask such a gift from a priest when there were others so much more deserving? Morose, Nick felt a hand on his arm and looked into the worried eyes of his friend.

"What's wrong?"

Nick shook his head. He didn't want to burden Jack with his sudden bout of depression. The doctor had seen enough of his moods. He forced himself to relax and gave his friend a strained smile. "Nothing."

Obviously unconvinced, the doctor started to speak, but there was a sudden hush, and both men looked up. Father Gregory was walking in.

* * *

Anticipation ran high in the room as the priest swept quickly up the middle aisle. The almost visible tension grated against Nick's already strained nerves. Watching Father Gregory stop to speak to one of the men awaiting him at the front, he mentally reviewed the few articles he'd managed to find on the healer. The articles had been careful to remain speculative, refusing to confirm or deny the priest's rumored abilities.

Finally, Father Gregory turned to face the crowd, a warm smile welcoming all. Nick could feel his own usually lethargic pulse pick up in anticipation and sternly ordered himself to calm down. The priest bowed his head, folded his hands and began a prayer. Nick bent his head, biting his lip as the reverent words burned by him. The invocation over, Father Gregory looked up and the crowd began to murmur, heightened anticipation making the mingled voices shrill.

The evening quickly settled into an obviously routine pattern. An assistant would place a slip of paper into Father Gregory's hand. The priest would call out a name, the supplicant would answer, and Father Gregory would go to them. He would touch a hand, a shoulder, make some type of physical contact, then pray over them and with them.

It was half way through the meeting when it happened. The elderly man, his white cane clenched in one hand while the other grasped Father Gregory's, echoed the priest's softly spoken prayer. When Father Gregory moved on, the man rubbed cloudy eyes as if they pained him. Nick, watching closely, saw the man's face suddenly transfigured by joy. He didn't have to hear the man's shout to know the once blind man could see. A miracle, right here in this dingy basement. Nick closed his own eyes, his heart reeling with a savage hope that this time he really was on the verge of salvation.

* * *

When the meeting was over, Nick waited patiently until most of the people had trickled out of the meeting hall before aiming a questioning look at the doctor. "Well, what do you think?"

Jack shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you. I didn't see anything that I can't explain."

"What about the blind man?"

"He may not have been completely blind," Jack explained patiently. "Any improvement may be simple psychological. I'd have to see an opthomologist's report of his condition before and after tonight so that I could be sure he actually regained any vision." Jack lifted his hands, "We're just beginning to learn more about the part the mind plays in disease and..."

"I know all that, Jack!"

At the doctor's wounded look, Nick bit his lip. "Sorry." He sent a look up at the front of the room where Father Gregory was talking to a handful of people. Abruptly, the vampire stood up. "Come on, let's get out of here."

Jack didn't move. "Aren't you going to talk to him tonight?"

Nick shook his head. "No. He looks tired."

Jack gave him a level glance, and raised an eyebrow. Nick felt himself flush, at the same time finding himself amused that the man could read him so easily. His lips twisting in a self-mocking grin, he admitted, "All right. *I'm* not ready to talk to him. Laying bare my secrets to you was one thing. I took the time to get to know you first. Telling a stranger, especially a priest, is something else all together. Happy?"

"Honesty *is* the best policy," Jack used an solemn tone, his eyes amused. He was relieved to hear Nick laugh.

"Will you get up, you jerk? I want to get out before Father Gregory sees us." Nick urged Jack from his seat. When they were both in the Caddy, the detective leaned over to start the transmission, but stopped with his hand outstretched on the key. Father Gregory, accompanied by another man, was walking out of the hall to get into an ancient station wagon.

Sensing the eagerness his friend was trying to contain, Jack asked, "When *are* you going to talk to him?"

Nick shrugged, then straightened his shoulders in decision. "My next night off. Thursday."

"Do you want me to come along?"

Giving the doctor a surprised look, Nick commented, "I hadn't thought about it." He considered for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, Jack. I think that'd be a real good idea."

"All right." The doctor hesitated. "Maybe it would be better if I call and make the appointment for you." At Nick's questioning look, he added, "I think I'd do better answering any questions he may have. It's been a long time since you've set foot in a church."

Nick grinned. "That's for sure. Thanks." He gave Jack a slanted glance, obviously concerned. "What *are* you going to tell him?"

"As little as possible."

They exchanged a speaking look, then Nick started the car. "This should be interesting. I just hope Father Gregory doesn't have a heart condition."

Remembering his own reaction to the revelation that his friend wasn't quite human, Jack shivered slightly. "Ditto."

As Nick touched the accelerator, he heard Jack's tentative voice ask, "Nick?"

Oh, oh. The detective caught a tone in the doctor's voice that told him Jack was going to get personal. Nick let his foot up and put the car in park. Warily, he glanced over at the doctor.

Jack was staring out the front windshield. As though aware of Nick's gaze, he cleared his throat self-consciously. "I was wondering..." The doctor shifted a little in the seat. "You've never told me...never discussed why..."

"Why I did it? Why I...went over?"

Jack nodded.

It was Nick's turn to shift uncomfortably. He didn't want to talk about it. Didn't want to even think about it. It still hurt. Lacroix's deceit. His own naivete...stupidity rather...at believing everything Lacroix had told him without question. Nick closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the car seat.

Jack, already regretting that he'd pushed his friend, was about to apologize when Nick turned off the ignition and started to speak. Rain began to pummel the Caddy's canvas top, and the doctor had to strain to hear the vampire's soft words.

"My earliest memories..."

There was a pause. Jack waited patiently until Nick felt comfortable enough to continue, realizing this topic was more than difficult for his friend to discuss. He'd shared Nick's secret for ages before he'd even heard the name Lacroix. Jack's patience was rewarded when the detective began to speak.

"All I ever seem to remember...is death. While I was growing up, I lost everyone I ever cared about. Most of my family...," Nick's voice caught in his throat. He couldn't talk about them. Not even to Jack. He skirted the issue, and went on, "I had a tutor. A priest. Except Brother Thomas never believed in

God...or anything. He taught me to feel the same. To mock religion, despise those who followed the church's law. It was easy for me to feel that way. How could I believe in a God who killed everyone I loved?" Nick shook his head, remembering. "Brother Thomas did a good job on me. He left me ripe to fall under Lacroix's influence."

There was another long pause, and Jack, feeling guilty at pressuring Nick into this before he was ready, said, "Look, we can drop it..."

"No," Nick was quick to interrupt. "It's okay." The vampire buried his hands in his jacket pockets and went on slowly, "When I became an adult, I was obligated eventually to obey our lord's summons and ride in his army. It was a terrible time, Jack. The wars never stopped. And on campaign after campaign, I was forced to live with death in all its forms. And without any faith in God, I feared it more and more."

Nick's voice became remote, as the memories drew him in. "One night, during a sneak attack by the enemy, I was wounded. Badly. We didn't have the miracle drugs your people take so much for granted. I almost died."

Jack saw Nick pull a hand out of his pocket to idly touch his shirt above the scar on his chest. Eager to ask details, the doctor had to force himself to be still.

The vampire went on, "It was Lacroix who kept me alive. As his hostage. My enemy. When my own lord refused to ransom me...," Nick's hands clenched into fists, ancient rage and grief echoing in his voice as he said, "I had no one to turn to for help. I was...desperate."

Nick was silent for another long minute. He was deliberately leaving things out of his explanation. Private, painful truths Nick knew with a pang that he'd never be able to discuss, even with Jack. Like the first time he'd actually met Lacroix, years before the war had forced them into the role of enemies. Swallowing, pushing the worst of the memories away, he went on, "Lacroix had me tended as if I were a valued guest, not as a prisoner. He even visited me occasionally while I was healing. We never discussed my ransom, or the war that was still raging. Till one night he came in to tell me that Reinhold, the Baron I was serving, was dead, his army decimated. The few survivors busy running for their lives." Nick tilted his head in a thoughtful expression. "None of them ever made it home. Later I found out Lacroix had hunted them down. One by one." A frown touched the detective's pale face. "He had a vile temper even then."

"Lacroix told me that he had become fond of me, valued my friendship. That he would allow me to repay my ransom as I was able. Would keep me in comfort until I healed and was able to travel." Nick shook his head in wonder. "That kind of generosity, it was almost unheard of. I was overwhelmed by his gesture."

I'll bet you were, Jack thought to himself. ***The manipulative bastard had you right where he wanted you. Isolated. Alone. Friendless. And dependent on him for everything.***

Nick looked across at Jack for the first time, as though sensing the direction of his thoughts. "Lacroix was an educated, cultured man, a rare thing in those days. I admired him. Respected him. I couldn't think of him as an enemy. When I was betrayed by my lord, then by my fam.." He cut himself short, amazed that he still felt so much anger that he'd let that betraying word escape. The detective bit his lip savagely. He shifted in his seat again, then continued, more calmly, "I no longer felt any loyalty to Reinhold's cause." Nick shrugged. "There was no honor in those wars, anyway. Reinhold was a greedy bastard. Only interested in getting more land. More gold. When Lacroix eventually offered me a command under him, I accepted."

Nick tilted his head, another frown touching his face. "I can't even remember now how long I was with Lacroix before I became aware of how different he was. To me he..." The vampire's voice trailed off again. Jack could sense Nick consciously re-ordering his thoughts, as though he'd been about to reveal something he'd prefer to stay private.

Nick's voice quickened, eager to finish. He condensed his story even further,

"One day, Lacroix told me he was beyond death. Immortal. And then he proved it to me. When he told me he could make me immortal as well, that I'd never have to fear death again, I was..." the vampire smiled a little, "...I was a fool. I wanted it. He told me something of what to expect when I changed over." Nick closed his eyes, remembering what had come next. "Then Lacroix told me what I would have to do to earn his gift. By then, I would have agreed to anything." Nick gave the doctor a twisted smile. "And I did."

The detective glanced out the window, tracing the path of a raindrop down the glass. "Lacroix never lied to me. He just never told me the whole truth." Nick shook his head. "For a long time it didn't matter. I was happy. Glad to share in the new life he'd given me. I didn't even care that I had to feed on humans to survive, though even then I hated killing. As foolish as I was, it wasn't until much later I understood exactly what it was I'd given up. What Lacroix's bargain had cost me. That I'd sold the soul I hadn't believed I owned for a life I'd grown to hate."

There was another pause, longer than any of the others, and Jack knew he wouldn't hear anything more about Nick's past this night. *What can I say after hearing that?* Jack thought to himself, numbed by the pain in his friend's voice. He cleared his throat, and tried, "You're not the same person anymore. You've changed..."

"And Lacroix hated me for changing. For wanting to stop killing." Nick's hands slammed on the steering wheel in frustration, and Jack almost jumped straight through the canvas roof in reaction.

"That's enough." Nick's voice was hoarse. "Let's get out of here."

Jack simply nodded. The detective had given him a lot to think about. He'd noticed the gaps, the hesitations, and feared he'd be spending more time thinking about what the vampire hadn't told him rather than what he *had* told him. And he still had a thousand questions. *Another time*, Jack promised himself, *I'll see if I can convince him to tell me the whole story.*

* * *

"And then, of course, I took over St. Magdalene's parish in '72. Or was that '73? I remember I had a little problem with..."

Jack and Nick exchanged a pained look. Balancing teacups on their laps, they'd been regaled with Father Gregory's recollections of his less than exciting life at various parishes for the last hour. He never mentioned his work aiding the sick. The cures. Not a word.

Nick cleared his throat and sent another desperate glance around the rectory's parlor, searching for inspiration on how to start. His eyes flinched away once more from the crucifix that hung in the place of honor over the unlit fireplace. He let himself send another hopeless look at Jack, who was grimly listening to the priest's rambling, a fixed smile in place. At this rate the sun would be up before he got a chance to discuss anything personal.

"...But that's enough about me." Father Gregory set his cup on a battered mahogany end table. "Tell me, Detective Knight, I'm a little curious about your visit. It's not often I get a LAPD detective to visit me. Is it about John? I thought I answered all your questions that night."

Who the hell is John? Nick asked himself, bewildered. *Oh, the stabbing victim in the alley.* He set his untouched cup on the floor by his feet. Straightening, the detective ran a nervous hand through his hair and glanced across at the patient priest. "No, it's not about John. It's a personal matter." He hesitated briefly. "Before I begin, I'd like to be sure that everything I tell you will remain between us."

"Perhaps you'd feel more comfortable in the confessional? I can open the church, if you wish."

Nick shuddered at the thought and answered hastily, "No. That's not necessary. Really."

The priest nodded in acceptance, folding his gnarled hands in his lap. "All

right. I'll treat this conversation as confidential. You have my word."

"Thank you." Nick shot a quick look at Jack, who gave him an encouraging nod. "I realize that what I'm about to tell you is...fairly strange. Perhaps almost unbelievable. But I swear I'm telling you the truth. Doctor Bennington will confirm it."

As Nick spoke, Jack sneaked another quick look at his friend. Nick had been cutting back even further on the small ration of animal blood he allowed himself this past week, in preparation for this meeting. As a result he was even paler than usual. The doctor noted clinically that his friend looked as if he'd just been released after a six month stay in a hospital. But maybe that was a look that the priest was used to.

Nick continued, "I know I look...," he trailed off, feeling perspiration bead on his forehead. This had been a lot easier with Jack. The detective tugged at his suddenly too tight collar and tried again, "I mean, I *seem* normal, but I'm not." He sat forward on the chair. "I'm actually a lot older than I look." The detective heard Jack mutter under his breath, *that's for damn sure*, and his own lips twitched. Nerves, he told himself. Nick took a deep breath to calm himself down. The priest's expression was becoming a trifle glazed, and he hurried on. "I don't know how much contact you've had with the supernatural. Or, I mean, I don't know if you've *had* any contact..."

The door leading to the front hall opened in the middle of Nick's speech, and a middle-aged, heavy-set woman strode into the parlor. "Father? I'm sorry to interrupt, but you have a phone call and it sounds urgent."

The priest stood up. "Coming, Donna. Pardon me, gentlemen, I'll be right back."

As soon as the door was shut, Nick let his head sink into his lap, groaning. "I don't believe this."

"I thought you'd be so smooth," Jack couldn't help teasing. "You know, the suave, sophisticated vampire effortless convincing the foolish mortal..." He was cut off mid-stream by a pillow thrown at his head. The doctor chuckled and tossed it back on the chair from where Nick had snatched it.

Jack was watching his friend pace up and down the small strip of red carpet in front of the sofa when the hall-way door swung open again. Father Gregory, wearing a concerned expression, re-entered the room. Nick turned to face him.

"I'm so sorry, Detective Knight, I have to leave right away." Obviously regretful, he took a step forward, extending a hand to touch Nick's sleeve in reassurance.

Unnerved by the idea of being touched by this man, afraid the priest would somehow sense what he was before he had a chance to explain, Nick involuntarily flinched away. The priest dropped his hand, a flicker of surprise passing over his face. Politely, Father Gregory continued speaking as if he hadn't noticed. "One of my parishioners needs me immediately. Please, call me tomorrow to set up another appointment."

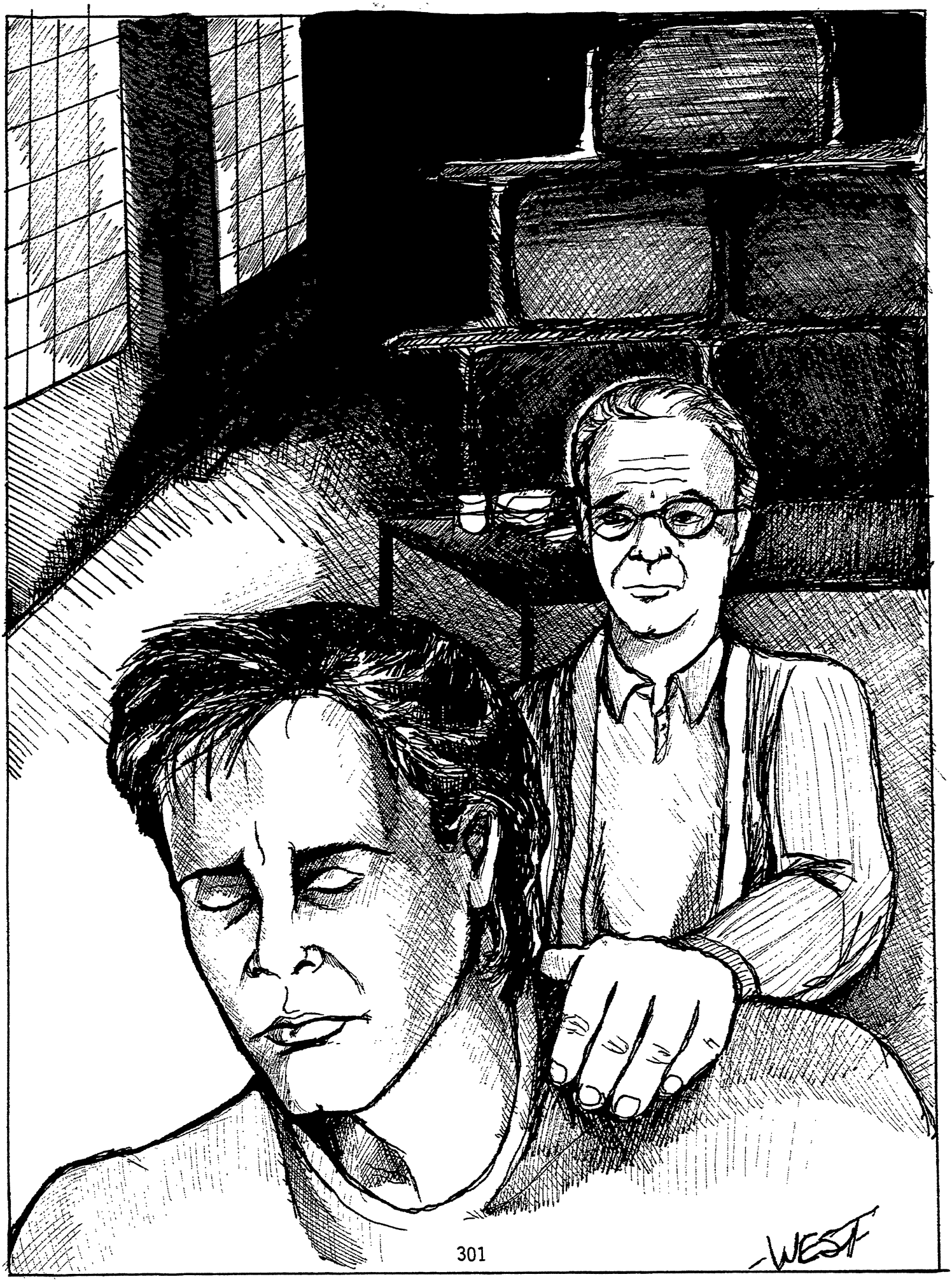
Covering his surprise, his disappointment, Nick managed to nod.

Donna appeared at the door, a coat draped over one arm. The stout woman handed the coat to Father Gregory and a slip of paper. "Here's the address, Father. Fourteen Kessel Place. Please drive carefully."

"Thank you, Donna. Gentleman, my housekeeper will escort you out." The priest gave Nick and Jack a quick smile and retreated through another door. They followed the housekeeper outside in time to see Father Gregory walk into the garage at the back. On impulse, before the woman could shut the door behind them, Nick asked her, "If you don't mind, would you tell us what was the call about? It's kind of late for him to go out, isn't it?"

Pausing in the middle of shutting the door, she gave a little shrug. "It's a young couple he just married a couple of weeks ago. Apparently they're having some troubles." On the last word she swung the door firmly shut as if afraid they would ask her another question.

The two men exchanged a quick look.


-WEST

"Domestic dispute? Not a healthy situation," Nick commented.

"I'm sure it's far from the first time for him."

"Guess you're right." Curling his hands into fists, Nick exploded, "Can you believe this! I was so close. Now I'm going to have to start all over again!"

"Well, maybe the delay will give you some time to practice your speech." Jack tried not to smile. "It sure needs it."

"Gee, thanks." Nick started down the stairs. "Want to walk home?"

"Uh, not really." The doctor followed him to the cadillac. "Are you going to call for another appointment?"

"Yeah. Can you make it next Thursday night?"

"Sure." Jack slid into his seat, watching as his friend fumbled with his keys, his mind obviously somewhere else, and gave an audible sigh. "You need to calm down. This is bad for you."

Nick gave him a blank look. "What's bad for me?"

"Stress. You don't want to be the first vampire with ulcers, do you?"

"Very funny, doc. Keep it up, and you may walk home yet." He grinned when Jack threw up his hands in mock surrender. "Want to visit for a while or should I drop you home?" Turning on the car, Nick backed out onto the street. As a matter of habit, he turned on the police radio.

"Home, please. Will you do me a favor? Stop at Luigi's? I skipped dinner, and I'm getting hungry."

"Luigi's?" Nick gave him a severe look. "Skip the garlic bread this time, okay?"

Jack laughed. "Sure."

After picking up Jack's dinner, Nick headed away from the downtown area. There was a snatch of static on the radio, then a staccato burst of chatter that turned the detective's blood cold. Shots fired at a domestic dispute. Nick savagely turned the wheel, reversing the Caddy's direction in a squeal of tires, narrowly avoiding a collision with another vehicle by inches.

Scraping himself off the seat, Jack gave Nick a concerned look. "Wait a second, that address is familiar."

"I know." Nick reached for the radio. "This is 81 Kilo responding to the 619 at Fourteen Kessel Place. Over." He gave Jack a quick glance. "It's where Father Gregory was going when we left."

"Oh, no."

They weren't too far from the rectory, and Nick managed to get them to the address in under six minutes. The brick apartment building was in an section of town that was being reclaimed from its former desolation. An ambulance had beaten them there, and Nick was out of the car and up the stairs before Jack had gotten his door open. Breathing a silent prayer that Father Gregory was unharmed, Jack went to see if he could help the emergency medical technicians.

The doctor found them on the third floor. Pressing his way through the curious neighbors already gathering, he entered the apartment. Two medics were crouched on the floor, one of them on the radio, the other suspending a plasma unit above the victim's body. Gently pushing a weeping woman aside, Jack pulled out his identification. "I'm a doctor." The medics looked at him with relief. "Glad to see you, Doctor. It's pretty bad."

Kneeling at the victim's side, Jack finally looked at the blanket-covered and groaned. It was Father Gregory, unconscious, blood seeping through the bandages binding his chest, already as pale as death. Pushing his emotions firmly to one side, the doctor asked a quick question before settling in to work. "There was an officer here. Where did he go?"

"After the husband. The neighbors saw him heading upstairs to the roof."

The killer...Nick already thought of him as a killer...even though Father Gregory had still been alive when he'd seen him...had jammed something across the

exit door at the top of the building. Rage made it easy to kick the door, and whatever had been blocking it, clear out of the frame. Racing through the falling pieces of wood, Nick turned in a quick circle on the roof, trying to locate his prey. The killer was human, and he'd just run up five flights of stairs. Despite an adrenalin surge, the man's strength would be flagging. He couldn't have gotten too far.

Even with his augmented night vision, Nick could see nothing. The killer must be hiding. He closed his eyes, concentrated on his hearing. Traffic noises, distant voices, music, a scream that heightened his pulse until Nick realized it was from a television. Then, there it was. A rapid pattern of breathing, a heart that was pounding in fear. Close by. A thin smile curved Nick's mouth and his eyes flashed open, glowing green.

Moving slowly, the vampire headed for the man cowering behind a squat metal structure. His foot came down on something thin that slid beneath his weight, and Nick fell on one knee, cursing as the slight noise alarmed the killer. The man gave his pursuer a terrified look, then darted across the roof, heading for the adjacent building close by.

Sprinting after him, the enraged vampire could taste the incipient pleasure of feeling his hands around the human's throat, of seeing the fear on his face before Nick took his life. The detective saw the human stagger briefly as he lost his footing, then clumsily leap the wide gap that separated the buildings. He almost made it.

At the edge, Nick threw himself lightly to the other building's roof, then dropped immediately down to the wooden skeleton of stairs loosely attached to the ancient high-rise's side. The vampire crouched down barely a foot above where the man clung to the stair's frame with one hand, his other arm dangling useless at his side. A part of Nick that he normally kept tightly leashed raged, straining, nearly free. It was the part that wondered idly how long the man could hold on, a part that rejoiced in the human's obvious fear. And another part of Nick grieved that despite his best intentions, he could feel no pity, hate so well.

"Help me. Please!" There was a terrified moan as the ancient stairs shifted under the two men's combined weight.

"You shot a priest," Nick commented, his voice frigid. "Why should I help you?"

"It was an accident!" A white, terrified face looked up at Nick. "Please! My hand, I'm falling..." The man's fingers slid off the rail, and a scream tore from his lungs. Before he could fall, Nick's hand flashed down to clamp on the killer's wrist, pulling him up to safety. The man sagged against him, almost unconscious. With distaste, Nick shifted his hand to the man's collar, dragging him up to the rooftop. The man collapsed on the level surface, moaning with relief.

Nick looked down at him, hesitating, the hate still pulling at him to take revenge. Shaking his head, the detective pushed his prisoner onto his back, and took out his handcuffs. He'd made his decision when he'd saved the man's life. He wouldn't kill. Not for hate, not for revenge. At least, not tonight. He felt no elation at his moral victory, only an empty ache that he'd been too late to save Father Gregory. His beast firmly chained, Nick let routine take over. "By the way, you're under arrest. You have the right..." He recited the rest of the Miranda by rote, doing his job, as he'd sworn to do when he joined the police force.

* * *

The first streaks of false dawn were lightening the sky when Nick's elevator opened and Jack walked in. After completing the hours of paperwork after the arrest, the detective had just gotten back to the apartment himself. Jack didn't need to say anything, Nick could read it in his face. "He's dead, then?"

"Not quite." At the renewed look of hope in his friend's eyes, Jack added quickly, "He's not going to make it, Nick. Father Gregory had a stroke on the operating table. He's already lost his spleen, part of his intestines, his kidney

was damaged, as well as..." Jack's voice tapered off. There was no point in detailing the rest of the injuries. At the naked pain in Nick's eyes, Jack averted his gaze. "I am sorry."

"Ten more minutes. If I'd only had ten more minutes to explain everything when I had the chance! Damn it! I was so close this time!" The frustrated, angry tone in Nick's voice was underlaid with such despair that Jack felt uncomfortable. The vampire walked over to stand before the deeply arched windows that lined the apartment wall. "Sometimes I think there isn't any way out. That I'm a fool for even trying to find a way back."

Dejected, Nick leaned one shoulder against the wall to stare out at the city gleaming in the glowing morning light. Tears of pain filled his eyes and he winced away from the searing brightness pouring through the windows, his hand closing convulsively on the wall switches. Both men watched in silence as the heavy shades rolled down, sealing the apartment in darkness. Then the artificial lights came on, their sharp glare a far cry from the golden shades of the new day.

Catching a glimpse of the look on Nick's face, Jack ached to find some way to help ease his disappointment, let him know he wasn't going through this alone. The doctor wanted to reach out, hold Nick, but he hesitated. Jack had learned that for the vampire, being touched triggered a whole series of complex reactions, especially when he was on the trigger edge of need, like this morning. Sighing to himself, the doctor decided to ignore the risk. Gingerly, Jack moved closer and put an arm around Nick's shoulder, trying without words to comfort him.

The detective, his hazel eyes dark, lifted his head, surprised. Then palpably pleased, Nick turned, deliberately wrapping his arms around the doctor, giving him a fierce hug. A heartbeat later, he just as deliberately wrenched himself away, the strain of repressing his need evident in his face.

"Thanks, Jack. I needed...," Nick, moved by the gesture of trust, looked away, unable to finish. Clearing his throat, he glanced up at the clock, and said simply. "I'm tired. I need to get some sleep."

"Do you want me to stay?"

"No, thanks, I'll be okay."

"Eat something."

"All right." Nick grimaced.

"Such enthusiasm makes me delirious with joy. Try to keep your spirits up, okay? Remember what Scarlett said."

Giving the doctor a suspicious look, the detective asked, "Scarlett who?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "From the movie 'Gone with the Wind', you ignoramus. An all time classic."

"So sue me, I haven't seen it. Yet." Nick gave the doctor a weary smile, trying to make a joke as he said, "I do have plenty of time to see it in, don't I?" Pretending an interest, he asked, "Just what did this Scarlett say?"

Jack's southern accent wasn't that great, but he faked his best drawl, "Tomorrow *is* another day."

Nick looked stunned for a minute, then put a hand to his brow in an dramatic gesture. "Tomorrow is another day? That's so incredibly profound, Jack. What didn't I ever think of that? Tomorrow is another day. Wow."

"If you're going to insult me, I'm outta here." Jack didn't try to hide his smile. "Call me when you wake up."

"Yes, mother."

Jack laughed, already in the elevator. At least he was leaving Nick in a better frame of mind. And who knew? Maybe Scarlett had a point. Maybe tomorrow would bring the solution to Nick's curse. Maybe he would live long enough to see his friend walk freely under the sun.

Somehow.

- The End -

[Cheryl has also written about Nick Knight in "Dry Ice," in Sherwood Tunnels 7, edited by Dianne Smith and available from Bill Hupe, 916 Lamb Rd., Mason, Mi. 48854-9445 and in Running, which appeared in the first issue of Good Guys Wear Fangs.]

A STONE IN THE RIVER OF TIME

Long have I lived in darkness,
watching times and faces change.
Always there, yet always apart,
a bystander at the game of life.

I watched as tyrants fell,
as lovers sang, and poets dreamed.
Somehow detached from the drama played,
the lives lived,
never heeding the call of death.

Can you know what that's like?
The horror? The pain?
Seeing friends grow old and die,
knowing the only way to save them
is to make them like you?
A cursed beast, killer in the night
who cannot face the pure light of day.

I have longed to see the sunrise one more time,
I, who never needed sunrises.
And love, sweet love, that I once could do without
has become what I most long for.

I scarcely ever dreamed that I'd find love
certainly never one like you.
So sweet and kind, loving and giving.
You make me forget that I will never see the sun rise.

But still I find myself afraid,
that this love I've found is just a dream
And that I'll awake one fateful day,
to find it blown away, like sand on the wind.

-Lisa Savignano

DARK STORM

Like a wild wind,
In some dark storm,
Shadows turn.
You, here, now,
Reaching, needing what
I give.
Love, life, my gift this
Night. Once more
To you. Your love, your life
Your gift for me, Forever in the heart
Of the dark storm.

-Heidi Staneslow

KINDRED SOULS

by

Dianne M. Smith

The black Cadillac seemed to appear out of nowhere. Its luminous headlights cut through the blackness of night to reveal a man walking by the side of the deadened highway. His arms were wrapped around his shoulders in a vain attempt to keep warm. The thin jacket he wore offered little protection against the dropping temperature. It was only September, but the feel of winter was in the air. Upon seeing the car the man stopped, and waved his hands about frantically, hoping the driver would notice him and stop. Bennu was cold, tired and miserable. The sun had remained hidden behind the storm-swollen clouds these past few days, and he was beginning to feel weakened by the lack of sunlight. If the weather wouldn't break soon he was going to have to stop somewhere and lay low. Being from another planet gave him an endurance that could not be matched, but without direct sunlight he was as weak as a kitten. He could not allow himself to be captured by those who hunted him. He had a duty to complete his allotted task. Whatever it might be. He could not remember why he wad sent to this planet. If he only had not been disturbed from his artificial sleep in this too-early time, he would have known what he was supposed to do; he would have no trouble surviving on this cold, dark planet. He was a man out of time. And lost.

As the car stopped, Bennu adjusted his backpack and raced towards the vehicle. The driver opened the door and gestured for him to enter. "It's too cold to walk," the man said. His voice was smooth like velvet and somewhat uninviting.

"Thank you for stopping," Bennu said, after tossing his pack over to the back seat and sliding himself down next to the leather-clad driver.

"No problem. Where are you heading?" the man asked.

"I'm not really sure. I have been doing a study of the ancient Indian burial grounds along the West Coast."

"So you're a student of Indian folklore," the driver said as the car sped back onto the road.

"No, just interested in the past," Bennu replied, as he settled back into the comfort of the cadillac's upholstery. As the car ate up mileage, Bennu found himself drifting. He was so tired he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer, and the lulling motion of the car's steady motion didn't help either.

In what seemed like minutes, Bennu found himself being awakened by a slight chill. They had stopped. The driver had his hand on Bennu's shoulder, which was shaking.

"What?" Bennu slurred, his voice heavy from the nap.

"Needed to stop for gas. I'm going to grab myself a snack; would you like anything? Coffee? A burger?"

Bennu just shook his head. He had run out of money the day before and while he was hungry, nothing was free on this planet, he had discovered.

"I'll buy, of course," the driver continued, as if understanding Bennu's hesitation. He slid out of the Cadillac. For the first time Bennu got a good look at his benefactor, as the man neared the bright light of the diner's neon sign. It was bright enough to be seen for miles around, which of course was the idea. Bennu

averted his eyes away from the diner and back onto his driver. The man was as dark as Bennu was fair; in a way they were like negative images of each other, both lean and tall. The man's dark hair had fallen into his face, so the features could not be made out. But he wore tight, black jeans and a leather jacket. Bennu could hear the click of the man's cowboy boots on the rocks and pebbles of the unpaved pathway.

*

Bennu had found himself almost falling asleep again when the man returned with a brown bag in his arm which he quickly handed over to Bennu. "Enjoy," he said, as he quickly put the car in gear. The tires spun on the pebbles and dirt as they left the gas station.

"By the way, my name's Nick, Nick Knight." the driver said.

"Bennu." Bennu replied, as he looked into the bag. "There's only one burger here? Aren't you eating?"

"On a diet, but go ahead. Interesting name." Nick slipped one hand off the steering wheel and held out his hand. Bennu got a clear look at the man's face as the clouds began to part, allowing a sliver of moonlight to dance off the headlights to illuminate the inside of the car for a brief moment. Both men appeared to be physically the same age; mid thirties. Hazel eyes bored into Bennu's bright blue ones. It was the way the man wore his hair in a somewhat punked style and the silver earring that he wore in his left lobe that gave him the illusion of someone younger. But the slight lines under his eyes and near his mouth gave the secret away; this was a man who had lived hard.

Bennu took Nick's hand in a gentle handshake and instinctively pulled back shortly at the coldness of the man's touch. It was a little cadaverous.

"So where are you heading?" Bennu finally asked, getting tired of the wall of silence that had sprung up between them as the hours passed.

"What?" Nick questioned, as if not hearing.

"Where are you bound?"

"Eventually New York."

"You driving all the way?"

"That's the idea." Nick replied sharply.

"If you don't wish to talk, we don't have to."

Nick took his eye off the road for a brief moment and looked at Bennu. "No, it's okay. Sorry, I was just in another world, that's all. What did you want to know?"

"I was just curious how you ended up near Seattle, if you're on you way to New York."

"It's a long story, but the trail began here."

"The trail!" Bennu uttered. He did not like the sound of that, to the direction of this conversation. "What kind of business are you in Mr. Knight?"

"Nick, please. Murder!" Nick said totally serious. "Don't mind me," Nick continued, noticing the strange look Bennu was giving him. "In my line of work, you can't take yourself too seriously. Don't allow looks to deceive you. I'm a cop." As if sensing the change in mood from the man beside him, Nick continued. "Was it something I said?"

"No, of course not," Bennu shot back too quickly, his voice taking on an air of danger that meant *back off*. He began to wonder if he would be safer on foot. He was probably overreacting as there was little chance that this cop knew he was wanted, but one could never be too careful. "Where are you from?"

"Here and there, but I'm working in San Francisco." Nick's voice trailed off. The sudden fear within Bennu drew Nick like a magnet, sending delicious signals, so that he had to force himself to look ahead at the road. He was beginning to wonder about the sanity of taking this trip, and even more so the sanity of picking up this hitchhiker. He didn't really have any choice in regard to the trip; it seemed he had become a specialist on the oddball cases. From outside appearances it seemed that there might be a rogue vampire on the loose. And if that were the case, they

all could be in danger. It could be a young one without guidance, or one of them without fear or reason. But be it a vampire or human, whoever was committing the murders had to be stopped. He had vowed that he was going to make up somehow for his past wrongs. If only he could curb his own unnatural desires. Jack Bennington, his friend and co-worker, was totally convinced that if he could only stop drinking blood, maybe there was a way he could become mortal again. The pathologist's first step had been for Nick to stop drinking the blood of humans. Jack would prefer that Nick stop drinking blood totally, but that was impossible and he didn't feel suicidal at the moment. Asking him to stop drinking the blood would be like asking a diabetic to stop taking his insulin. For now all he could honestly say was that he hadn't killed for blood in centuries; he had been one of the rare vampires who lived by taking small amounts from many donors in an evening. But now he was surviving on the blood of animals alone. It wasn't the same, but he could survive on it. He would do anything to change what he was, if it was possible. Jack seemed to believe that it *could* be possible; Jack was the only human Nick had trusted in centuries.

Suddenly Nick wrenched the driving wheel with such force that Bennu's head hit the dash in front of him, as the car swayed out of control to avoid the great buck that bounded across the road.

*

A little time later Bennu found himself flat on his back on the cold, hard ground. He raised himself up slowly. Every movement sent piercing pain to his nerve endings, but at least nothing was broken. In his weakened condition he didn't have the energy to heal himself.

"Are you all right?" a voice behind him said. Turning his head around, he came face to face with his benefactor, who had bent down to his level. Nick seemed no worse for wear except for a few scratches and bruises.

"What happened?"

"I don't know...everything's a bit foggy. You pulled me out of the car just before it went up in flames, then passed out."

"Where are we?" Bennu asked, still dazed.

"It started to rain and I saw this cave just off the road. At least we can stay dry until the weather breaks up."

Bennu wrapped his arms about himself as a coldness seeped into his bones. It wasn't the dampness of the cave that made him cold. This place reeked of something. Something he couldn't put his finger on. "Where's the light coming from?" Bennu asked, noticing that the cave seemed to glow in a greenish hue.

"Interesting, isn't it...must be a natural light source; crystals, maybe? Feeling any better?" Nick asked, while he checked out their temporary quarters.

"Yes, and thank you." Bennu replied, picking himself off the cold, hard ground.

"I owe you; you pulled me out of the car." A shudder went through Nick as he thought about the Caddy. The car was more that just a mode of transportation; it had been a faithful friend, and had saved his life more than once. He was going to miss it. "Bennu?" Nick asked upon seeing the intense look the fair-haired man was giving the wall of the cave. Upon the walls were pictures and symbols. Bennu reached into his packsack, which fortunately didn't get left behind, and brought out a carved rock. When he held it up to the wall, the symbol on the rock matched the one on the wall.

"She's here, she has to be." Bennu began to mutter, as he followed the wall further back into the cave, which was larger than both of them had thought. Nick could just make out a name in the almost unintelligible syllables his companion murmured.

"Who's Mira?" Nick asked, as he reluctantly trailed after him. He could sense the beginning of day overhead and felt the pull for sleep. No matter where he was, he always knew the moment of sunrise. An overwhelming exhaustion would settle over him mentally as well as physically.

"This symbol," Bennu pointed to the wall, "this is what I have been searching for; Mira must be close by. Mira. She was to be my partner. We were separated." He followed the rock wall, looking for the other symbols, other clues to his partner's whereabouts. Nick shadowed Bennu deeper into the cave, where they were met by a wall of fallen rock.

"No!" Bennu screamed into the darkness, his hand grappling with the unmovable line of boulders.

"Bennu, what are you doing? This is solid rock." Nick reached for the other man.

"She's behind this; she has to be," Bennu muttered while breaking from Nick's weakened but unnatural grip.

Before Nick could react, a screeching wind whipped through the cave, knocking Bennu back; he slammed into the rock wall with a heavy thud. A low growl echoed around them.

"You fool," a disembodied voice snarled.

"Yago!" Bennu whispered, as the wind picked him up and pinned him to the opposite wall. As the wind continued to tear around him, he concentrated on the amulet that hung about his neck. Weak from hunger, lack of sunlight, and the recent accident on the road, Bennu could barely get the crystal within the metal to flutter. Faint yellow enveloped the ancient astronaut as he broke free from the force that held him. His jeweled amulet lay against his chest like ice, cold, without energy.

A brilliant light pierced the semi-darkness of the cave and a figure materialized. Tall and stony of countenance, it resembled nothing more than a Chacmool, the receiver of sacrifice to the ancient South American people. The shoulders were broad, dripping with golden ornaments; the face was wide and non-human, topped by a glistening headdress dripping with a veil of bone.

"Where is Mira?" Bennu screamed at the creature before him.

"She was never here; you will never find her, you imbecile. Prince of fools." Yago held out his clawed talons to Bennu. A ball of fire and ice appeared out of nowhere and Yago threw it towards him, as if pitched for a baseball game. The ball crystallized in midair as showers of ice crystals swirled around him, solidifying into a coffin of ice.

Nick stood transfixed, shocked by the surprising events. His blood boiled as he saw the foul creature bend over the crystallized form of the young man. Nick felt death grip Bennu in its blackened cloak; Bennu's heart slowed, his eyes glazed over as the coldness penetrated his being. Nick felt himself drawn towards the death. Stepping out of the darkness, he moved towards the repulsive abomination, allowing his natural instincts to take control...his instincts that had allowed him to survive for over seven centuries, while others stronger than he had passed over to death. Nick threw himself at Yago. Growling, his dangerous fangs glinting in the greenish hue of the crystal light, he passed straight through the ghastly form of the Yago to hit solid rock. Yago had no physical form; he moved through the creature as if he had just walked through air. "What the hell!" he screeched in surprise, once again leaping through the phantom figure. And yet again stepping into nothingness.

Yago laughed, mockingly, a deep rumble. He once again held out his talons, where another crystal ball materialized, this time aimed towards him. He jumped back as the ball exploded into slivers of crystal ice. The weapon had no effect; the slivers just fell off the vampire like leaves falling off the trees.

"One for me, I would say." Nick laughed, his features hardening and taking on an inhuman quality.

"What are you?" Yago growled, his eyes contracted into small slits of darkness. "You are not from this pitiful world."

Nick didn't get time to counter, as out of the darkness a black wolf appeared and leaped towards him. He dropped to the ground and rolled as the animal snapped at him with its razor sharp teeth. Then he grabbed the beast's neck with superhuman speed and strength; his hand held onto the animal the way a mother cat holds to her

kittens. Nick quickly leaned into the animal's neck and bit, drinking the sweet nectar from the warm body. His hunger overwhelmed all else.

With renewed strength Nick approached Bennu, carefully watching Yago, who seemed to have shrunk before his eyes. Bennu's form was covered with ice, cold to the touch. Nick gathered him into his arms; the warm blood that now flowed through his veins seemed to melt the ice crystals that held Bennu in a death-like state. Bennu's body convulsed once before he gulped for breath like a landed fish on a sandy beach. He opened one eye, than another, seeing the dark form of Nick leaning over him. Bennu sensed power that he hadn't felt before, and a warmth that seemed somewhat artificial radiated from the man before him.

"The amulet..." Bennu whispered hoarsely, seeing Yago prepare for another, final attack. This time Bennu entered his mind, tearing down carefully built-up mental barriers with ease. *Nick, our combined strength can defeat him. Help me!* The last words echoed in Nick's consciousness before disappeared completely.

Nick gently touched Bennu's amulet, which felt scorching to his touch, but did not burn. The crystal within sprang to life, an all-consuming, golden light centered at its heart expanding outward, sending shards of light in all direction. Bennu covered the amulet with his hand, forcing Nick to let go as the heat became unbearable.

Stepping forwards surrounded by inhuman monsters, parodies of wolves but larger than any that existed, Yago expanded, his grotesque form shifting between the solid and gaseous state. An orange glow surrounded him as another crystal ball formed in the air, blue sparks crackling around the supernatural weapon as Bennu stood up, leaning on Nick for support.

The Beasts sprang as the crystal ball exploded. Nick allowed Bennu to fall against the rock as he rushed against the swarm of snarling monstrosities. Bennu aimed his Phoenix-shaped amulet towards Yago. The shards of ice melted in the all-consuming brightness that pulsated from the now-alive crystal in Bennu's palm.

Darkness; Nick fell to his knees as all about him the creatures transformed back into their natural state. Yelping and yowling in terror, they fled out of the cave. At that same moment an inhuman scream vibrated at the very rocks of the cave until it could be heard no longer. Yago was gone.

*

"We must leave this place," Bennu said with force, noticing that Nick had no plans to move, seemingly rooted to the spot. He grabbed onto Nick's hand and pulled him along, away from the unnatural light of the cave, towards the warmth of the entrance where the sun had risen to meet the day.

As they neared the entrance Nick stopped suddenly, causing Bennu to fall into the dirt-covered ground. He reached down to help Bennu up, and said quietly, "I can't go any further with you; the sun is up and I am a creature of the darkness. You are the light."

Bennu tilted his head towards the other man, noticing for the first time the silver-pale eyes that stared back at him, the unnatural paleness to his skin, the slightest hint of fang-like teeth, and even that his gait was different. He seemed to glide when he walked; it was neither feminine nor masculine--it was just different. "I will return," he finally said, before he went towards the entrance.

Nick watched Bennu's retreating back. He could see the rainbow of coloured brightness that danced at the cave's entrance. The floating beams hurt his sensitive eyes, but he could not turn away, not yet. It had been too long since he dared look upon the light with his own eyes. The muted light, filtered by the protection of the rock, was like music for his vision. He could not resist: he reached out with one hand, his fingers extended outward...towards the brilliance. He stood there, just far enough away that the scorching light could not burn, could not destroy him. Before he could no longer trust himself, Nick quickly turned away and headed back into the darkness that was his existence. His purgatory.

*

Bennu leaned his slight but lean frame into the open window of the car. When the sun had set, they had walked to the nearest town. Nick had bought a beat-up, late-model cadillac. The car would need a lot of work before it could replace the other car, but he was lucky to find a vehicle at all. Finally, however, they were able to continue on their way. The drive was unusually silent, both men caught up in their own thoughts. When they reached the outskirts of the city, they could see the lights glittering like a field of earth-bound stars. It was time to separate; each had a different path to follow. Nick had a job to do in New York; grisly murders were being committed. Bennu had to continue his quest to find Mira. It would be a while before Yago could return to this plane of existence, but he would return. Yago had followed him through time and space to try to kill him. This was only the beginning. Where Bennu was a follower of the light, Yago was a servant of the darkness.

"It's time to part. Thank you, Nick. I hope you find what you are seeking. I won't forget you."

"Bennu," Nick asked, "Before you leave, who/what are you?"

"I am only human, like you. We are the fears that lurks in men's souls. I have been called both angel and devil. But I am only myself."

A slight smile played across Nick's features as he listened to Bennu's words. "I won't forget you, either." He reached into his jacket and took out his dark glasses and put them on. He took Bennu's hand in a final good-bye.

There was a deafening crack, which drowned out any further words the star traveler seemed to want to say. The clouds above glowed within, a deafening roar echoed throughout the heavens and heavy, dark rain poured down. Bennu allowed Nick's icy hand to slip away as he stepped away from the car to find shelter. The car sped away into the distance as Bennu wondered who this kindred soul was. Before today he never imagined that vampires were anything more than make-believe or creatures of legend. Perhaps Nick was another visitor from far away? He would never know for certain. But it didn't matter, for now he knew he wasn't the only stranger trying to fit in. And somehow that made him feel better in his lonely quest.

- The End -

[Dianne Smith leads a fairly busy existence in Victoria, British Columbia, which is on the west coast of Canada. She thinks it's pretty well the most beautiful city in the world, acknowledging possibly a bit of bias... She is a hair stylist in the "real" world, wife to the man she loves (who is a good sport in regard to her overwhelming interest in fantasy), and mom to two pre-teen boys. She also shares her dwelling with an assortment of animals including cats, a dog, and lizards, just to mention a few. She loves to read, go to the theatre (especially musicals), and write stories. This tale is part of a trilogy of NICK KNIGHT stories which she has written over a two year period; the others appear in Sherwood Tunnels #'s 6 & 7, which she edited (available from Bill Hupe, 216 Lamb Rd., Mason, Mi.) Besides NICK KNIGHT, Sherwood Tunnels also includes SON OF DARKNESS; she hopes to have more vampires in future issues.]

MACGYVER ran from September 1985 to February 1992; it starred Richard Dean Anderson as MacGyver and Dana Elcar (seasons 2-7) as Pete Thornton. Among several recurring characters was Michael Des Barres as Murdoc, a hit man working for a mysterious organization who seemingly could not be killed, whether he fell from a cliff thousands of feet high, or was at the bottom of a skyscraper in the process of demolition. Murdoc's obsession with defeating/killing MacGyver formed the basis for the plot lines for several episodes.

Using his Swiss army knife, an always-handy roll of duct tape and anything he found lying around, MacGyver turned ordinary items into just what he needed to get out of jams. Initially he was a special operative for the DXS (Department of External Services, a CIA-type agency), but in second season he began work as a "trouble-shooter" for the Phoenix Foundation. Missions ranged from environmental concerns to international intrigue. Mac consistently refused to carry a gun, thinking rather than shooting his way out of problems.

Barbi'93

INTERLUDE: PART I

by

Pat Dunn and Diana Smith

Call me crazy, but to me a relaxing weekend is one spent getting back to nature: a stream full of trout just waiting to be caught and no one around for miles. No terrorists, no crises, just me and fresh air.

Pete didn't understand my need to get away from civilization, away from the reminders of my last encounter with Murdoc. I needed a whole new perspective, a chance to let my mind work on other problems and forget.

Forget the fact that I had learned that Murdoc wasn't quite human, forget the beautiful woman who had told me the truth about Murdoc's nature. Forget that Murdoc had tried to turn me into one of his kind.

A vampire.

It had been several weeks since Varina Thanos had waltzed into my life and dropped her little bombshell. And I have to admit it took some mighty hard convincing on her part before I accepted the fact that not only was Murdoc a vampire, but so was she.

Not a cape-swirling, coffin-sleeping monster, but a person who exists solely on blood. I know it sounds crazy, and I refused to believe it...until she needed blood and I was the only available source.

Murdoc also drank my blood, but Varina assured me that he didn't have any sort of control over me. Maybe not, but ever since then I couldn't get her out of my mind, and there were recurring nightmares about Murdoc.

I think I was better off not knowing.

Mac shook himself out of his reverie and glanced at the sky. He watched a hawk wheel on an updraft, soaring with it until it disappeared behind a cloud. Smiling, he pulled his fishing line out of the stream and began to pack up his tackle.

"So long for now, guys," he remarked to the fish he hadn't caught. "See you tomorrow." He splashed to the shore, then headed down the trail to his cabin.

Mac had bought this place several years ago, though he hadn't had much opportunity to use it yet. Even though Pete Thornton had obviously wanted an invitation to come up and try the trout fishing, Mac had pretended not to notice. He needed to be by himself for awhile.

He shivered as the mountain breeze turned chillier with the approach of sunset. He quickened his pace toward the cabin, turned a bend in the trail, and halted as a woman stepped out from behind a pine tree.

"MacGyver?"

He stared at the lovely, black-haired woman, then broke into a wide grin. "Varina! It's great to see you again--I was beginning to think I'd hallucinated the whole thing. What are you doing here?! How'd you find me?!"

She smiled, but her dark eyes were melancholy. "It's good to see you, too, MacGyver. Nicholas brought me, but he has gone to a nearby motel to wait for me. And as for why I am here..." She looked up at him as he paused beside her. "I am here because you called me."

Mac looked puzzled. "No, I didn't... Call you? What do you mean?"

"Perhaps I should have said you summoned me," she said, tucking her hands around the crook of his arm. They continued to walk along the trail to the rather rustic cabin. "You have been troubled by bad dreams."

"Well, I..." Mac broke off when he realized she wasn't asking, but rather stating it as fact. "How do you know?"

"We have a link, you and I."

"A link?"

"When I...took from you, it bound us together," she said, trying to explain in such a way that it wouldn't upset him. "Do you recall what I told you about Murdoc's control?"

Mac frowned as he tried to pull that scene from his memory. "Something about belonging to you?"

She nodded. "Is this your cabin?"

Mac whipped his head around, surprised to see that they had arrived at his place. "It's not much, but it's home--at least for now." He opened the door and invited her in, setting his fishing gear by the door. "Would you like something to dr--, er, no I suppose not."

She smiled at that, sat on the sofa and patted the space next to her. "You have nothing to fear from me, MacGyver, believe me. Sit and let's talk."

Cautiously he sat down, keeping as much space between them as possible.

"Oh, MacGyver," she sighed sadly. "Do you really fear me?"

He looked a little guilty at that. "I'm not afraid of you..." He broke off, then started over. "I know you won't hurt me, Varina. But some weird things have been going on in my head lately, things I just don't understand. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you..."

"No, MacGyver, *I* am the one who is sorry. No matter how badly I needed blood, I had no right to take from you," she interrupted. "You were frightened, unsure... You had no idea of the repercussions. It was wrong of me and I am so sorry. And now I bring you news that worsens the matter."

"Let me guess--Murdoc has surfaced," Mac said with a heavy sigh.

"How did you know? Has he contacted you as well?"

"No, but he's done it before--apparently died but survived. It's his pattern," Mac said, leaning back on the sofa. "As well? Are you saying that you've heard from him?"

She looked away, refusing to meet his gaze. "Yes," she said softly, "We have received word that he still exists. And that he is not finished with us--or you. That is why I opened up our link, to ascertain if you were all right. But I could not ignore your summons."

"Summons? What summons?"

"Your heart has been calling out to me."

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you, Varina," he confessed, dropping his gaze to his hands. "It's part of the reason why I came up here." He shrugged, quirking a smile. "I thought maybe if I got away from people for a few days, I could sort some things out..." He stood up restlessly, paced over to the fireplace, and occupied himself with laying a fire, placing kindling and a log on the andirons. "Things about you, and Murdoc..." He carefully lit the fire, watching the first flame lick into strength. Dusting off his hands, Mac stood up and faced Varina. "I wasn't expecting to see you here. But I'm glad you came."

"Are you? You have not changed your mind about me? Decided that I am a monster, some creature to be feared?" she asked, liquid black eyes staring at him.

Mac dropped to his knees before her, took one of her hands in both of his. "What *does* bother me is the fact that you're a married woman..."

"Nicholas is the husband of my heart, my reason for existing," she interrupted, touching his face with her free hand. "But we both must look outside our marriage for continuance. We cannot nurture one another."

"And that's all I am--a meal?"

"Never that, MacGyver," she protested, pulling her hand free from his tightening grasp. "Over the centuries there have been many--for both Nicholas and

myself. But humans are so...mortal, and to watch a loved one age and die...we have tried to limit our emotional involvement, rather than suffer the pain of loss. The heart is fickle, however, and not always easily controlled. Thus I find myself drawn in too deeply at times. I did not intend to grow so fond of you."

He searched her face, correctly reading what she left unspoken. "I don't suppose I meant to fall in love with you, either, Varina. But I have. So what are we going to do about this?" He tried to make his tone light, but his eyes betrayed him.

"Oh, MacGyver," she whispered, touching his cheek fleetingly. "You're very lonely, aren't you?

He answered honestly, "Well, if I am, I've got no one to blame except myself. It's probably just as well, considering the line of work I'm in. A wife and family would just be a liability to a guy like me." He hesitated, and added, "But sometimes I wish..."

"You wish you hadn't made that choice," she finished for him.

"Yeah. I wish I'd done things differently, sometimes," he admitted.

"That is a feeling not limited to you, or even to mortals," she said with a sigh. "I have never regretted my love for Nicholas but there are other things I would have done differently. For one, I should never have involved you in this madness. But I couldn't bear the thought of Murdoc harming you, even though you were no more than a file."

"I was a what?"

"I only knew you through your Foundation file," she said, frowning at him.

"You had access to *my* file at the Phoenix Foundation?!

"All board members have such access...oh, didn't you know?"

"The board members keep very low profiles--no one knows who they are," Mac said, staring at her in amazement. "You're on the Phoenix board?"

"Do you remember the name of Nicholas's gallery? The one Murdoc torched?"

"The Phoenix's Eye..."

"I did say it might be more than a coincidence," she reminded him. "Of all the files I've read, yours was the most intriguing. I felt I knew you, but I resisted the temptation to seek you out. I was afraid of getting too fond of you. But when I found out what Murdoc was planning... And now I find my fears have come true. I am very fond of you, my modern day knight."

Mac actually blushed at this, and he turned away from her, going to the fire and awkwardly poking at it.

"Why MacGyver, have I embarrassed you? I am sorry," she said, going to him and placing a hand on his arm. "I should not have come--it was wrong to give in to my desire to see you."

"Don"t go," he said at once. He looked down at her and added, "You'll stay the night, won't you? It's too dark for you to leave now, anyway. You can have the bedroom. I'll bunk down out here on the couch."

"As you wish," she said.

"Well, good," Mac commented. "There must be something to eat around here--would you... Oh. Sorry." He lapsed into an awkward silence.

"It's all right, MacGyver. I don't require a meal, but you must prepare something for yourself. I shall sit here and enjoy your lovely fire, and then I shall keep you company while you eat--unless you prefer privacy? If my presence makes you uncomfortable..."

"No, it's not that," Mac assured her. "I'm not used to--I mean, you *are* married and I shouldn't feel..."

"Ah, I understand. It's your feelings for me that are uncomfortable," she said with a nod. "Think of me as your friend, nothing more."

A friend. She wanted me to think of her as a friend when just the touch of her hand sent my heart racing and my hormones running rampant. A friend.

"Sure," Mac said, managing a smile. "Friends." He patted her hand as it rested on his arm, then gave the fire a last fierce stab with the poker. He watched the sparks swirl up the chimney, aware that Varina had returned to her place on the sofa. He set the poker down and started for the cabin's small kitchen.

Just friends. Well, why not? I'd had enough practice at it. Besides--what else did I honestly think there might be between us? She was a married woman, and I'd better remember that. I could just hear my Grandpa Harry now, if he'd lived to see his favorite grandson tempted toward adultery. "Bud," he'd say, "I always thought you were the smart one in the family!" And then he'd shake his head. He'd have a point, too.

MacGyver smiled to himself and started opening cabinets and drawers in pursuit of his supper. He was actually starting to feel a little hungry.

They spent a pleasant evening in conversation. MacGyver was careful to refrain from any further talk of his feelings for Varina. If she sensed the change in his attitude toward her, she gave no indication of it. They talked of many things: music, art, literature, and history. Mac was fascinated to learn she had known many great men and women he had only read about in books. Varina discovered Mac's guitar, and urged him to play it. He did so reluctantly, protesting that it was only a hobby, but she listened with great attention and praised his skill. She even sang to his accompaniment, a folk song he remembered from his childhood.

At last, Mac showed Varina to the bedroom's doorway and watched as she went inside. Once he was certain she had everything she needed, he collected a pillow and blankets and made up a nest for himself on the sofa.

MacGyver stretched out on his side staring at the dying embers of the fire. He pulled the blanket up over his shoulders, and closed his eyes. *Lonely? I hadn't thought of myself that way--until she said it. But she was right.*

* * *

MacGyver was standing in a dark pit. Light glimmered far above him. Around him the darkness whispered with voices he half-remembered, moved with forms he thought he recognized.

He stepped forward cautiously, feeling his way. Then the darkness cleared, and he saw that he was on a mountainside, clinging to a ledge, a rope wrapped around his body. "Mike!" he shouted, as a woman swung toward him. He snatched for her, but she was pulled away from his outstretched arm, dangling far out over a bottomless void.

"Mac! Help me!" she cried, even as the rope snapped.

"No! Mike!" he sobbed, as the wind was slammed from his lungs by the impact with the rock face. He knew by the sickening loss of tension on the climbing rig that she had fallen to her death.

"You killed her, MacGyver," a voice said from above his head.

Mac raised his head, looking up at the circle of light. "No--it was the rope..."

"A likely story," the voice sneered. "She blames you, MacGyver."

Mac knew that voice--hated it. "Murdoc!"

A spotlight flared off to the side, illuminating an old-fashioned cabinet radio. Music began to play--a Christmas carol. "I'll be home for Christmas..." the choir warbled, silenced as Mac drove his fist through the speaker.

"Don't you like that song, MacGyver?" mocked Murdoc.

"Why are you doing..."

"Angus," a woman's frail voice said, causing Mac to whirl around. "Why didn't you come to see me? I thought we'd be together for Christmas."

"Mother," he whispered, taking a step toward the woman in the hospital bed. "I'm sorry--I had to go. They needed me..."

"*I* needed you, son."

He reached out toward her, shrinking back as she vanished into thin air.

"Tsk, tsk," Murdoc's voice smirked. "What a touching scene! Too bad you missed saying farewell, isn't it?"

With an effort, Mac lifted his head and stared at the figure outlined against the white circle of light. "It wasn't like that. She understood..."

"But you *are* a killer, MacGyver. Shall I demonstrate it?" With insinuating laughter, Murdoc waved his hand.

Mac looked wonderingly at the gun in his hand, then stared at the man standing a few yards away from him.

"MacGyver?" Pete Thornton said. "What are you doing?"

Horrified, Mac saw his own hand raise the gun and aim it at his best friend's heart.

"Mac! No!" Pete shouted, even as the gun fired, shattering his chest with scarlet droplets of blood.

"Pete!" screamed Mac, unable to run to his friend's aid.

"You see, MacGyver?" Murdoc said. "It's no use denying your true self. I know you. I own you, in fact." He flung his arm wide, and Mac felt filaments of fine wire jerk tight on his arms and legs. "I'm the puppeteer, MacGyver, and you *will* obey me!" He gestured, laughing as his prisoner danced at the end of his strings.

"No, Murdoc!!"

"Yes, macGyver! You're my little fledgling monster now--how do you like it?!" Insane laughter echoed as he flourished the puppeteer's control, forcing MacGyver to jerk and dance far below him. "Mine!"

"No!" Mac sat bolt upright, his chest heaving with the fear of the nightmare.

"MacGyver! It's all right!" Varina said, firm hands on his shoulders. "He isn't here--Murdoc is *not* here!"

Gasping for breath and sanity, Mac looked at her with wild eyes.

"Shh, it's all right, my brave knight," she crooned, pulling his head to rest against her breast and stroking his face. "We're safe. It was only a bad dream." She began to rock him as a mother would rock a child.

Only Mac didn't feel like a child, and his thoughts were most unchildlike. Cupping her face, Mac claimed her lips in the kiss that had been haunting his dreams.

Varina's arms twined around him, her fingers caressing his hair as he moved on top of her, pinning her to the sofa.

Rearing up, Mac pulled from her embrace and sat on the edge of the sofa, staring at the fire. "I'm sorry-- I shouldn't have--"

"Yes, you should," she said softly, draping her arms around his shoulders and pressing herself against his back. "If we don't do this, we shall always wonder and yearn. It's not wrong, MacGyver, believe me."

"It's not right," he said, as much to convince himself as Varina. "You have Nicholas-- I've got no business wanting this! I can't--"

"I do have Nicholas, and you have no one. You mustn't concern yourself with Nicholas. He understands--"

"*He* understands? How can he when I don't?" Mac turned to her, then glanced away when he realized she wore only scanty underwear. "I'm not like Murdoc--"

"Murdoc? What has he to do with what is happening between us?"

"Nothing," Mac mumbled, rubbing his hand across his mouth.

"Your dreams still trouble you," she said, stroking his cheek. She gently exerted pressure, pulling him back against the sofa cushions. "As much as I would like to compel you to forget your concerns about us, I will not. If you do not wish to make love with me, I must accept it. But we can be friends, can we not?"

"It's not that I don't want to, but I shouldn't," Mac protested when she kissed his cheek, then curled up beside him and rested her head on his chest. He automatically put his arm around her, holding her close.

"You mustn't think about Nicholas--our marriage is not like that of mortals," she pointed out, rubbing her cheek against his bare chest. "We must look outside our relationship in order to survive."

Mac closed his eyes and tightened his hold on Varina. "I used to think I knew a lot about survival...now I'm not so sure." He shivered, less from the chill than from the pleasurable sensations she was arousing. Almost apologetically, he kissed the top of her head.

Varina lifted her face toward him, and their lips touched in a tentative kiss, gradually intensifying as their desires overcame their rational objections. When they broke apart, Varina smiled at him, her hands caressing his back and shoulders. "It *is* all right, MacGyver--I promise. Love me."

He made an incoherent sound, then buried his face against her neck, kissing and nuzzling while his hands cupped her breasts through her thin brassiere. Varina wrapped her fingers in his hair, pulled his head up, and sought his lips with her own.

All thoughts of whether it was right or wrong fled from his mind as Varina led him to the rug before the fireplace, her hands and lips touching him everywhere, seemingly all at once.

The heat from the fire was nothing compared to the heat from their passion. Their few items of clothing were discarded quickly, and they soon lay entwined in each other's arms. The glowing embers in the fireplace cast a ruddy light on their lovemaking as lips and bodies met with increasing urgency.

Mac closed his eyes as the pleasure overwhelmed him, forgetting his nightmare and Murdoc, aware only of the woman beside him. "Varina," he murmured, looking at her.

She smiled at him and brushed her fingers across his chest, which was now glistening with a fine sheen of perspiration. "Yes, MacGyver?"

"We--"

"Yes, we did," she agreed, kissing him lingeringly on the lips and then snuggling her head on his shoulder, pressing her naked body against his.

"But you didn't--"

"Take from you?" she supplied when he hesitated over the words. "I did not need to, MacGyver. Are you disappointed?"

"I just thought--what you said about survival--" He broke off, sat up, and reached for the blankets tangled on the floor at the foot of the couch. Wrapping them around Varina and himself, he settled down beside her again. "I'm sorry. It doesn't matter."

Varina raised up on her elbow and looked into his face. "You think it would seem less like adultery, and more acceptable to Nicholas, than this way."

"Maybe."

She smiled a little, and touched his cheek. "Few men of your time would be so troubled by their consciences, MacGyver. Perhaps, if I stay a few days longer, that will become necessary. But only if you wish it."

"What's a little blood between friends?" he quipped, his tone light as he pulled her into his embrace. But his eyes grew serious as he stared at the fire. "Varina, what does 'fledgling' mean, exactly?"

"Among our kind, it is a human who is undergoing the Change," she said, her tone wary. "Where did you hear that term? Was it from Murdoc?"

He nodded. "You said you and I have a link. Do you mean a telepathic link or something?"

"Yes. MacGyver, why are you asking these questions? Is it because of your dreams?"

When Mac Hesitated, Varina took his face between her hands and pulled his gaze to meet hers. "Tell me, MacGyver," she said softly. "I want to help--share with me."

"Murdoc said I'm a killer, just like him," Mac confessed. "And then he made me kill Pete, but it *was* just a dream...it seemed so real."

"And Murdoc? Did he seem real?"

"His voice was so clear...like he was right here," Mac said with a frown.

"This dream tonight--was it the first?"

Mac considered, then shook his head. "No, there have been others, ever since...then."

Varina squeezed his hand, knowing what he referred to so obliquely. "Since Murdoc took your blood at the lighthouse."

"Yeah," he muttered, "hypodermic needle and all. He made sure I saw him drink it... Varina, I feel as if he's inside my mind, somehow, trying to make me--like him. Is that possible?"

"Is it possible for you to become a monster like Murdoc? No," she said with a firm shake of her head. "I'm afraid it is possible, however, that he is inside your mind, trying to gain control of you. I had hoped that my influence would be

the stronger one, that I could prevent Murdoc's. It would seem that even though he took without physical contact, without the mingling of saliva with your blood, he has managed some measure of control. Perhaps because he took after I did... I don't know. Nicholas said that if it did prove to be the case, then I would have to--to take from you again, so that I am the last one and would have absolute control."

Mac swallowed, remembering that time in Murdoc's trap when Varina had been badly burned, in need of blood. "You want to do *that*--again?!"

"It is the only way I know to cancel Murdoc's influence," she said, drawing away from him as if unable to bear his repugnance at the thought of being touched by her in that manner.

"Oh." Mac let his breath out slowly, then sat up and looked at Varina. "When?" He put his hand on her shoulder, turning her to look at him.

Varina met his gaze, her expression surprised. "You're willing?"

"Guess I have to be," he said frankly. "Besides, you're a lot better at it than Murdoc." He smiled, shrugged a little. "If I have to choose between being his fledgling or yours, I'd sure prefer to be yours."

She shook her head at his comment, smiling sadly. "Never that, MacGyver. Only a donor--and a very dear one." She caught his hand in hers, and raised it to her lips.

It won't work, MacGyver.

Mac gave a start, pulling his hand from Varina's clasp. "Murdoc!"

"MacGyver?"

He looked around, his eyes wild. "I heard him--!"

"There is no one here except you and I," she said, her hand on his arm. "I heard nothing--"

"Murdoc said it won't work," Mac insisted, touching his temple. "I heard him!"

Varina took his face in her hands, and forced him to stare into her eyes. "It will work, no matter what he says," she said firmly. "You will belong totally to me--unless he takes from you again. Even then, my influence should be the stronger, because our sharing will be with love."

He exhaled, trying to think rationally. "Should be? But you don't know for certain, do you?"

"No, MacGyver," she admitted, "I *trust* that it will work, and you must believe it as well--or Murdoc will have won."

He rubbed his forehead, then nodded. "Guess you're right, Varina. What do you want me to do?"

A slow, sultry smile curved her lips. "Do? Why, you do what we just did--and you did it very well, so I believe you can manage it quite nicely. And when the time is right, I shall manage my part."

"Now? I mean--"

"I think you have sufficiently recovered," she said, slipping one hand under the blanket and stroking his thigh.

Mac's eyes widened at her touch. While her hand aroused him, she leaned over him and touched her lips to his throat. At the contact, he flinched and Varina drew back.

"No fear, my knight," she said softly, brushing her lips across his. "I will not take until you are ready, I swear. We must take our time and make certain you enjoy this. I promise it will be better than the first time." She pulled the blanket away, tossed it aside and covered his body with hers. Her lips skimmed across his chest, down his belly to his groin.

"What are you...doing?" Mac squeaked, squirming under her erotic assault.

"That should be obvious, even to a chivalrous knight," Varina said, raising her head and claiming his lips with hers. "Relax, MacGyver, and give yourself over to the passion of the moment."

"Relax?"

Straddling him, she smiled at his shyness. "You are much too tense," she said, hands massaging his neck, shoulders, and chest. Her long, black hair swung

down, the curling ends tickling his chest. Mac closed his eyes and let her work her magic.

He was lost in the waves of ecstasy when her head once more dipped to his groin, and he felt a sharp pain in his inner thigh. The brief pain was forgotten as he was drawn into a swirling vortex of wildly intense passion.

Before he had recovered from that onslaught, her mouth was at his throat and the pleasure was so intense this time that he fainted.

When he came to, MacGyver found himself wrapped in the blankets and close to the fire. Shivering, he started to sit up, and clutched at the slipping blanket.

"I am sorry, MacGyver," Varina said, bringing in a tray and kneeling beside him. "I forgot how fragile mortals can be. Here, you must drink a lot of fluids..."

Mac stared at the steaming cup she offered him, then reached out a shaky hand. Varina put the cup in his hand, then wrapped both of her hands around his, and pushed the cup to his lips.

"I'm...okay," he said, his voice husky.

Giving a nod, she sat back, and it was then he noticed she was wearing his red-plaid, flannel shirt and little else. "Nice shirt," he said, taking a sip of what turned out to be herbal tea.

"I hope you don't mind," she said, looking down at the hem of the shirt.

"No, I don't mind," he said, appreciating the length of silken, bare leg the shirt didn't even begin to cover.

"I didn't want to waste time getting dressed," she said, curling up beside him and touching his cheek. "How do you feel?"

"Cold," he admitted, and she tucked the blanket around him.

"It will pass," she assured him, urging him to drink some more tea. "The light-headedness will also pass."

"I don't know about that," MacGyver murmured, staring into her eyes. "Varina, I've never felt--anything like..."

"It wasn't unpleasant, I hope."

Mac shook his head, smiling at her over the edge of his mug. "No, it wasn't unpleasant."

"I'm glad," she said softly, turning her gaze to the fire.

Mac set the mug down, leaned forward, and took her chin in one hand. "So, I belong to you now? No more Murdoc?" he asked, turning her to face him.

"My influence is the stronger, so no more Murdoc," she said, sadness shining in her eyes. "I regret that it came to this, MacGyver. I wish I could change what has happened."

"I don't regret everything, Varina," Mac said, drawing her close and kissing her. "I don't regret meeting you."

"Oh, MacGyver," she said, her voice quivering as she stroked his cheek. "I can't..."

"You can't stay," he finished. "I know." He kissed her temple, then smiled. "But what the hey-- We can still be friends, right? Just friends?

"We can be more than friends, if you wish," she said.

Mac shook his head. "Maybe very good friends, but no more than that," he said, with a pang of regret. "I know you keep saying that your relationship with Nicholas is different, but to me you're still a married woman. Do you love me?"

His question caught her off-guard. "I-- I am very fond of--"

"I didn't ask you that," Mac Interrupted her, his thumb caressing her bottom lip. "I said, do you *love* me? Like you love Nicholas?"

She kissed his thumb while staring into his eyes. "Not...like Nicholas," she admitted reluctantly. "I don't believe it's possible to love anyone the way I love him, but that doesn't mean I can't share my heart with others."

MacGyver sighed and cupped her face before slowly withdrawing his hand. "I can't ask that of you, Varina. It wouldn't be fair to either of us. I'd feel like I was interfering between you and Nicholas, and you'd have to deal with my death, eventually..." He trailed off and looked at the dancing flames. "I think we'd better stop this now, before it gets to that point. I'll always be your friend--

and Nicholas's."

She clasped his hand, gently stroking the back of it while studying the strong fingers. "You *do* remind me of another noble knight." Raising his hand to her lips, she kissed the palm, then released it. "It'll be as you wish--just friends."

Mac nodded. "Thanks, Varina." He yawned, then shook his head. "Sorry. I didn't get much sleep last night... Or tonight, for that matter." He leaned back against the sofa and let his eyes drift shut. "Why don't you bring Nicholas up here for a few days? We can try out the fishing."

"Perhaps," she said, stroking his brow. "Sleep now, my gallant one," she whispered as he sighed and sank into a deep sleep. "Dream only of pleasant things."

* * *

Mac awoke with a start, sat up, and rubbed his eyes "Whoa, that was some dream," he muttered, giving his head a shake.

"More bad dreams?"

Swinging his head around, Mac stared at the vision from his dreams. Varina stood in the kitchen doorway, a steaming mug in her hands. Mac clutched the blanket, drawing it up to his chin. "It wasn't a dream."

Handing him the mug, Varina sat beside him and tucked the blanket around him. "A dream?"

"I...we...it was real," Mac said stupidly, taking the mug.

"Very real," she assured him, brushing his hair out of his eyes. "How do you feel?"

"Great," Mac said, sipping the tea. "I haven't slept that good since, well...in a long time."

"No bad dreams about Murdoc?"

"Umm, nope," Mac said after a moment's thought.

"I'm glad," Varina said with a smile. She stood up, and Mac realized she was fully dressed. "I think you will be just fine, but you have only to call if you need me."

Mac stumbled to his feet, clutching at the slipping blanket. "But where are you going?!"

"Not far--or perhaps not far enough," she said cryptically. "Nicholas is waiting for me, and I do believe it's time I returned to him. He has been most understanding about this and I must thank him."

"Understanding...yeah, right," Mac mumbled, raking a hand through his hair. "Thank him for me, will you? For not coming after me and ripping my face off, or something."

Varina flashed the dazzling smile he remembered from their first meeting. "I shall, indeed. Promise you will be careful, my knight, and that you will call if you need us." She stroked his cheek, softly kissed him, and gathered up her bag.

"Yeah, sure," Mac said, following her to the door. He watched her walk down the path and disappear into the woods. "Goodbye, my lady," he said before closing the cabin door. He shivered and pulled the blanket closer.

Unseen, a slight, dark shape slipped from behind a tree, its gaze fixed on the cabin. "We've only just begun, MacGyver," Murdoc said, as he threw back his head and laughed wildly. The maniacal sounds echoed through the otherwise silent wilderness.

Inside, MacGyver paused, and whispered to himself, ***Murdoc!*** But he shook his head and continued on to bed. After all, the sounds were only those of a coyote; and the bad dreams that Varina had chased away would not return.

******

INTERLUDE: PART II

by

Anne Motley

[The characters of Nicholas and Varina are used with the permission of Diana Smith and Pat Dunn, who served as co-editors for this vignette.]

Nicholas Tannek stood in front of the cabin that he and his wife Varina had rented, inhaling deeply and appreciating the sunlight and the clear, bright blue sky. He looked in the near distance at the tall ridge of tree-covered mountains that cut off the view, and at the other peaks that seemed to spread, shoulder upon shoulder around in every other direction--except far down the long valley where they were currently nestled. It was a good morning to be alive... Alive? He laughed softly to himself. Now *that* was a concept he hadn't thought about in a very long time--1640 perhaps when they were almost caught by witch hunters who hadn't an inkling that what they were really dealing with was vampires... He shrugged and turned to walk down the winding path into the valley. He was extremely grateful that most of the legends were not true. It would be *truly* depressing to never see the sun again. Varina...what was she doing this morning? Was she still with MacGyver? He frowned a bit. Jealously was something neither one of them could afford. Starkly intense feeling was as necessary to them as blood, and they had long ago agreed that passion far outweighed fear in terms of desirability. Or was it the lesser of two evils? It was something they could not afford to think about often...

The tall grasses brushed his legs as he walked, wildflowers speckling the landscape with dots of color in the early spring morning. But what *was* he feeling? He knew that what Varina felt for Mac was more than simply something passing in the night that could be easily forgotten...things always seemed to get complicated when a mortal knew them for what they were, and accepted them anyway... No matter how hard he tried to avoid the analogy, he couldn't get away from it... *Varina* had known *him* for what he was...

Two falcons whirled overhead, their cries eerie in the stillness as Nicholas followed the winding path further and further down the valley from the cabin. There didn't seem to be another living soul within miles... So he was taken completely by surprise when the path rounded a large boulder and he nearly tripped over a very beautiful young woman sitting before an easel, painting the wildflowers and the mountains.

"Good morning." Her voice startled him in the silence that had been filled with only the sounds of nature.

"Good morning to you, too." The charm was very genuine, and it came to him as naturally as breathing. "What are you painting? May I see?"

"Of course." She edged back a bit for him to get a clearer view. The rampant wildflowers dominated the foreground, the angles juxtaposing in a haunting and unusual fashion with the mountains and far-off distances down the valley.

"*Very* good. Have you sold any pieces?"

She smiled. "No, I do it for...therapy."

Then he noticed. How could he *not* have noticed? The crutches lying on the grass beside her indicated she could not walk unassisted, although her charm, beauty, and grace seemed to make it somehow irrelevant. The delicate, fey set of her face, with the pixieish twinkle to her sky-blue eyes, the long, pale tresses falling straight almost to her waist, the pale brows and lashes erasing any doubt that there was any artifice involved in its color... "I...I..." Tongue-tied for the first time in so long he could no longer remember, Nicholas stammered a moment and then regained his lost composure with a flourish. "Well, if you do not do it professionally, then you should."

"Don't be embarrassed. Lots of people don't notice at first." She flashed him a smile that made him melt totally, and forget for a moment to wonder what Varina might be doing at that same moment.

"I'm not, but...how did you get all the way out here? Isn't it a bit far to come on crutches?" He said it in such a natural manner that neither of them could possibly be embarrassed.

"Oh, that's easy. Duncan brought me."

"Duncan?"

"He works for my father, and sometimes he takes care of me." She smiled. "He's *big*, and he simply carried me."

So simple. Well, why not? "Do you often come to...out of the way places?"

"Not all the time. Just when the mood strikes me. And when Daddy can spare Duncan."

An uneasy thought popped into his mind. "And where's Duncan now? Does he leave you unguarded, at the mercy of strangers?"

"Not usually. But he had pressing business to attend to, and I told him I would be all right here alone for a few hours. And besides..." She showed him a small gadget attached to her belt. "I can always summon help if I need it."

"Oh..."

"I wasn't going to need help, was I?" Now she was teasing him. Nicholas came as close to blushing as his metabolism would allow.

"No, of course not..." He had also come seriously close to stammering again. *Why* was this girl having such an effect on him?! "Well, I must be getting back." Nothing like retreat when in doubt.

"Don't go." He looked back at her hesitantly. "At least say I'll get to see you again."

Suddenly the hesitation vanished and he broke into a smile. "Of course. And how would you like to arrange this?"

"Dinner, perhaps?"

"No...I unfortuntately have plans for dinner that I cannot break, but perhaps... Are you staying at the cabins on the ridge?"

"Yes, of course. We always stay there. I'm in the third one on the right and Duncan is next door."

"Don't you have any other attendants?"

"No, I don't need them. I manage very well by myself." She beamed at him, then grew thoughtful. "But why all the questions about attendants? You're not a serial killer who seeks out helpless young women and then does them in, are you?"

Nicholas laughed, this time very genuinely. "Not hardly-- I'm just a vampire who drinks their blood." He had a wry smile on his face.

They both laughed, the serious tone of the conversation broken by the absurdity of his statement. A feeling of genuine delight had taken over for both of them.

"So what shall it be? Will you join me in my cabin after dinner for cocktails?"

The boldness of her statement had caught him off-guard. He caught his breath, hesitating a moment, disarmed. The forwardness of the modern woman still took some getting used to.

"If you don't want to..." The look on her face said, *If you don't want to*

spend time with a cripple...

He recovered quickly. "I'd be absolutely delighted. Would ten o'clock be too late?"

Her smile was beaming. "Not at all. I'll look for you then."

* * *

It was almost ten. Soon it would be time to visit... What was her name?! He laughed aloud at himself. They had forgotten to introduce themselves! Well, he would find it out soon enough.

As he tried to find something to keep himself busy, Nicholas thought back to this afternoon, and his most unexpected conquest... Or was he the conquered? As he had turned away from that fey slip of a girl, he had been absolutely puzzled and overwhelmed by his feelings and reactions. He felt fourteen again--and mortal. He was not supposed to get infatuated--and certainly not with a very young girl with ice-blond hair and sky-blue eyes who could not be more than eighteen... He, of all people, should certainly know better!

Now he busied himself around the cabin that Varina had hurried off from with a quick kiss almost as soon as they had checked in. What had kept her a second night? Mac must have needed her more than she had expected. Although she *had* said she might be several days...

He looked at the clock. Ten minutes before ten. He would wait five more minutes, then go. And he would just have to try to put Varina out of his mind. She was only keeping to their age-old agreement, and he would have to keep his part: no intrusions, no interference, not even so much as a mental nudge. She would be *fine*. He smoothed his hair and clothing; he was wearing a white, ruffled shirt open at the neck and a black unstructured jacket. It *was* possible to keep to the styles of yesterday, and not look out of place in the present... He turned abruptly and headed for the door.

* * *

Kathee Sinclair was busying about the cabin, humming gently to herself, her crutches hardly slowing down her movement. Had she really invited the handsome stranger she had met on the mountains to have cocktails with her alone in her cabin? Yes! Had he really accepted? Yes, again! She was either crazy or crazy in love or both. He was really the most delightful man she had ever met, and the very thought of him set her heart racing.

The knock finally came at the door, and her heart raced into overdrive as she moved to open it as quickly as she was able.

"Good evening." His smile was just as she remembered it, and in his hand was an old-fashioned bouquet of the wildflowers that had been on the hillside this afternoon.

"Come in." She blushed, then lowered her gaze. "Sit down." She indicated the sofa.

"Thank you." His smile was just as disarming as it had been in the sunlight.

"Would you like something to drink?" After all, that was what she had invited him for, wasn't it?

"A bit later, perhaps. Now, sit by me, and let us talk." He flashed that smile again, and patted the sofa beside him.

"Yes, of course." She looked down, too shy to meet his gaze.

He took her hand and kissed it, in a gallant, old-fashioned manner, looking at her face almost quizzically until she looked up to meet his eyes. Then she could only melt as she lost herself in the depths of them... Still gazing into his dark eyes, she trembled as he turned her hand over and kissed the palm, then cradled it to the side of his face.

"I..."

"Shhh... Don't say anything." He slid over close beside her and slipped his

arm around her waist, then tilted her face up to meet his, his other hand behind her neck, underneath her long hair. *What was she doing?* But she couldn't stop herself, any more than she could stop breathing. Crippled as she was--and yes, she insisted on the old-fashioned word--she was going to be loved by a handsome, "to-die-for" dream-come-true of a man, even if it was only for one night, and only for once in her life. Whatever his motivations were, she didn't care. He was kind, and he made her heart race. All she asked for were the memories to keep her warm in the lonely years ahead...

* * *

Varina was lost--lost and confused. She had tried all day to find her way back to the string of tourist cabins where she and Nicholas were staying, but all she could hear were the echoes in her head. What on earth was Murdoc doing? How could he echo like that from all directions, completely confusing her sense of which way she should go? Would she ever get home? What would Murdoc do to her this time if he actually caught her again? She had been a fool to go to MacGyver alone, knowing that Murdoc was alive somewhere, still interested in MacGyver, and still interested in her...

* * *

Nicholas gently eased the girl back onto the sofa so that she was lying down as he sat beside her. She gazed up into his eyes, so innocently, so trustingly... He shook his head... What was he doing?! *No, it would be all right!* She wanted him as much as he wanted her. Yes, she was very young, but if she were a virgin, he would leave her as such, and it was very, very rare that he ever felt so much for a woman he brought to his bed. *Not since Varina... NO!* He would not think along those lines, and he would *not* think about what Varina was most likely doing at this very moment...

He glanced down at the girl, holding her eyes with his for a long moment. "My name is Nicholas." His voice seemed to catch her by surprise.

She smiled. "And mine is Kathee. I'm glad you came here tonight."

Nicholas smoothed her hair back, and touched her face with his hand. "Did you think I might *not*?" he asked, cradling her cheek in the palm of his hand.

She relaxed in pure happiness. "No..." She clasped his hand with her own and brought it down from her cheek to rest between her breasts, feeling the warmth of his palm through her clothing. "Never for a moment," she assured him.

He leaned forward and brushed his lips across her forehead, then sat back, vaguely troubled. What on earth would happen to this child, in the long run? Obviously, Daddy had money. But what difference would that make where love was concerned? Obviously, she perceived her physical condition as a handicap of some sort, dismissing her art as mere "therapy," referring to her dependency on this bodyguard Duncan. Would that right, special man ever come along who would make her see her handicap for the irrelevancy it was?

"Take me into the bedroom." Her voice cut like a clearly tuned bell into his thoughts.

Nicholas smiled. "Yes, yes, of course... But I don't want to rush things..."

She echoed him with a teasing grin of her own. "Of course!"

She *was* teasing him and he knew it. But she had just agreed to make love with him. Good, she needed to learn her own sensuality, learn that her legs had nothing to do with her ability to give and receive love...

Nicholas frowned a little, some twinge of conscience nagging at him. Should he go ahead with this, reacting as he did to her? He had always kept himself emotionally detached from the women he took for their blood and their passion; he made *them* feel good, and took his own psychic nourishment from *their* emotions as he took the nourishment for his body from their blood... What would it be like to be with a woman (child?!) other than Varina with whom he was reacting directly, in which he was feeling his own emotion rather than someone else's...?

What the hell. He was lost and he knew it. No matter how much he tried to convince himself that his purpose in this encounter was wholly altruistic, the plain fact was that he wanted her as much as she wanted him. He smoothed her cornsilk hair back from her face, smiled into the eyes that had turned sea-gray in the dim light, and bent his head to kiss her lips. Nothing mattered but the moment.

*But where is Varina? Varina is **fine**. Get Varina out of your head!*

Trembling, he carried Kathee into the bedroom, and set her on the big bed with its old-fashioned quilts. She lay back, and he lay back beside her on his side, supporting himself with one elbow.

She looked at him expectantly, surprised that he was not being more polished and sure of himself. Somehow she knew that his hesitancy was not characteristic, and that he was normally *very* sure of himself...

"What is it, Nicholas?" She smiled again, enjoying the sound of his name.

He touched her hair, gently. "I was just enjoying... It's been a *long* time since I have simply taken joy in looking at a young...woman." He had another rueful, private smile that she would only read as enigmatic; he had almost said young *mortal* rather than young *woman*.

"Here. Let me help you with this." She had scooted forward toward him cross-legged on the bed, and had begun unbuttoning his shirt. She took one button at a time, carefully, then slid quite close to him and slipped her hand inside his shirt. Uncharacteristically, he let her, enjoying her touch, and the warmth of her now-stroking palm against his bare chest. He kissed her, gently and deeply on the lips, and found himself half-covering her body as they pressed down into the deep quilts, his hands cradling both sides of her face as the kiss continued.

He pulled back, and shook his head. "I don't know what came over me!" Puzzled, she looked at him. How could she know that he was not accustomed to losing *himself* in lovemaking except with Varina, and that he normally would give a woman pleasure while keeping his own emotions and his clothing intact? This encounter was *not* following his customary pattern!

"Then let it happen again." She had scooted over to him, and sat facing him. She slid the open shirt backward off his shoulders, stroking his chest as she did so, reaching to the soft fur under his arms and then around to his back, trapping his arms at his sides in the shirt sleeves that he had not yet removed. Then she began kissing him--trails of soft, feather-light touches that drove shivers all the way through him. Flustered, feeling the uncharacteristic response in his groin, he tried to get away from her--but only succeeded in tangling himself further in his clothing and falling back on the bed.

"Now I've got you!" She was half on top of him, grinning from ear to ear.

"Well, yes, I suppose you have!" His grin was rueful. "Now, if you'll just let me up..."

"Give me one good reason why I should!"

Varina. "Well, I..."

"Got you there, too." Suddenly serious, she propped her elbows on his broad, bare chest and then changed gears to look at him with that mischievous, winning smile. "What is it about you, Nicholas? You seem to be so worldly, yet now you're acting as shy as the boys from school! Tell me..."

"I... Do you think you could let me up first?" He *was* thoroughly trapped, with his arms caught in the shirt that was now underneath him holding him prisoner as surely as if he were bound. Inexplicably there was a flash of panic at the trapped sensation, but he immediately closed his mind to it. This was not something he would allow himself to feel.

"No, I don't think I could." And she proceeded to begin work on the buckle of his belt.

"I... Wait, please."

She turned to look at him. "What is it? I don't understand. Have you changed your mind?"

"No... It's just that I think there are some things you should know about me

first."

She drew back, letting him up. He shrugged the shirt back up on his shoulders but did not button it.

"Well, what is it?" She was still smiling, but he could tell that she was getting ready to decide that she had picked up a loony and bolt. Nicholas suddenly realized that he did *not* want that to happen...

Half-truths, then. "If you continue with that, you will only be disappointed. Lay back, and let me love you."

She did as he asked, but seemed a bit disappointed. He opened her blouse, then helped her out of her jeans. With lips and hands, he worked his magic, bringing her to a dreamy ecstasy. But for some reason, he did not take blood. It was a last-minute whim. He was not really hungry... And then in another whim, he curled up beside her to sleep, rather than leave as was his way.

* * *

The wall clock was striking three in the morning when Kathee woke up. She was wearing only her bikini panties that Nicholas had slipped back into place, and they were both covered with a blanket. He was still dressed, with only his shirt unbuttoned. Was he impotent, then? Was that why he did not wish to be undressed himself? That would seem to be the case from what he had said...

She made up her mind quickly and set to work, beginning with a line of kisses down his chest to his belly. He stirred, making pleasurable noises in his sleep, but did not awaken. She began to work on his belt buckle... Okay, so maybe he couldn't perform as a man should from some sort of physical problem, and it embarrassed him... But she would absolutely *swear* that he had been responding to her earlier, before he had stopped her first assault...

"Mmmmmm." He shifted, enfolding her in his arms. She was able to just reach his zipper. The noise of it sliding open seemed to be unnaturally loud in the quiet darkness. But still he did not awaken. She continued to plant a trail of soft, fluttery kisses on his chest and nipples and ribs, moving downward to include his now accessible belly. In his sleep, he softly moaned with the pleasurable sensations, and his fingers stroked her hair as she kissed him.

Then there was awareness. What was she doing?! What was happening?! He felt a tightening in his groin, and then her hand was stroking him, inside his clothing... He should stop her. He should stop her *now*! But instead, he slipped off the confining trousers and briefs to give her better access...

Completely against his normal pattern, completely against everything he ever did or planned to do, he gave in to total *non*-detachment. She was giving him pleasure as he had given her, and there seemed to be no reason in the world not to accept it... *Varina... Where was Varina? **Probably with MacGyver...!*** The words did not come to him, but the image did, and he swallowed his reluctance, and brought the girl down beside him so that he could reach her lips. Those haunting eyes, ghost-gray now in the darkness, gazed into his... *Who are you, Nicholas?*, they seemed to say. Her hand was stroking him again, and he found himself responding in a way he had not believed possible.

"Don't deny me, Nicholas. Let me have this to remember from our night together..."

The near-climax in his groin was almost overwhelming. Her strokes had certainly aroused him, but now there was no release. Torn, he nonetheless moved atop her, but then his eyes met hers. *I can't do this! She's little more than a child. What if she were to have a child herself?* Haunting images raced through his mind of the child that Varina had conceived and lost, so long ago... *AND VARINA? WHAT ABOUT **VARINA?***

He rolled away from Kathee, onto his back, and flung an arm over his eyes. He knew it was a double standard, but somehow it seemed important that he never take any woman except Varina in that particular way... Then he almost laughed at the absurdity of it all. Up until now it had been academic. He hadn't thought he

could take any woman except Varina in that particular way...!

"So you really don't want me?"

He lowered his arm from across his face, then raised his eyes to meet hers, heated and frustrated desire clearly written in them. "I do want you, but not in that manner. Would that be so horrible?"

"I don't believe you. But, no, I suppose not. You must have a darn good reason." She grinned as ruefully as the situation would allow and turned onto her side, facing him. "But, tell me, what am I doing wrong? I'm very new at this, but I would like to make you feel as good as you did me. Show me what to do?"

He nodded wordlessly, and covered her hand that was upon him, showing her how to bring him to a climax. Then, in the end, intuition took over. When it was finished, the release of tension brought a fit of nervous giggles from Kathee, and a satisfied sigh and grin from Nicholas. He hugged her happily. It just seemed the right thing to do. From her sigh of contentment, he knew it had been.

"Could we take a shower together?"

Nicholas was taken completely by surprise. He had never *thought* of taking a shower with anyone except Varina--but that was because he never took his clothes off with anyone else. But why not? They were certainly already intimate enough, and her disappointment at his not being able to perform... He thought a long, low whistle. No, that had not been the case. He *could* have made love to this woman-child in the traditional way, and in fact he almost had, but he would have had regrets...

"Yes, I suppose we could..."

"Carry me?" She turned her pixieish face up to him. He had quite forgotten that she could not walk without assistance.

A wide grin split his face, all his substantial charm quite returned. "I'd be absolutely delighted, my lady!"

She giggled as he scooped her up and headed for the bathroom.

* * *

Nicholas? Where are you? Can't you hear me? Help me! Varina could not understand why Nicholas could not hear her silent pleas for rescue from the dark, disorienting hell that Murdoc had trapped her in. It was only the forest, and physically she was alone, but the cage was just as real as if it had stout, wooden bars... *NICHOLAS!*

* * *

VARINA...! No! He would stop thinking about her. They each needed the passion as well as the blood of mortals if they were to survive without killing. *There is no need for jealously! Stop thinking about Varina! You remember how reluctant she was, all those centuries ago, but you convinced her that it was necessary for survival...* The thoughts echoed in Nicholas's head. He could not understand what had gotten into him tonight. First, he had indulged in his *own* passion rather than drinking in the passion of another, and second, he had not fed... The thought made the fangs itch in his gums, and suddenly he felt a different type of passion. He could sense the tiny rivers of blood sluicing through the networks of veins underneath the healthy, young skin... He cradled her head close against his neck so that he would not have to let her look at his face as he carried her, afraid that *she* would grow afraid, seeing the fangs that now he would not have been able to hide...

Thankfully, they arrived at the shower. He reached for the cold water, then turned the hot on instead, thinking of the girl, hoping that the heat would distract him as thoroughly as the cold would have... *So why was he reluctant to take blood from her?* Was it because he could not do it--now--without telling her what he was, and he feared she would turn away from him? Yes, he admitted to himself. Yes, exactly. He had seen the look she had momentarily given him back on

the sofa, as if to ask, *Was this all a terrible mistake?* He bent his head in sadness (in shame?)... How long had it been since he had even momentarily regretted what he was? *Not since that long-ago day when he had rescued Varina from the prison cell in plague-infested London...*

"Nicholas? What is it, Nicholas? What's wrong?" Kathee touched the side of his face and brushed the hair out of his eyes, but he still wouldn't look up to meet her gaze.

"You...were right about me. I *am* really strange, and really weird. You should not have invited me to your home." The running water washing over his body added to his strange, uncharacteristic feelings of disorientation, of uncertainty, of something *wrong...*

"I don't care about your silly secrets. Let's just get cleaned up and get back to bed where we can talk." The abandoned playfulness of lovers had been washed away as quickly as the soap bubbles that swirled their way down the drain.

* * *

Dry, warm under the quilts, he couldn't put it off any longer. They had not dressed at Kathee's insistence, and lay naked together under the sheets. *I want to savor having you with this kind of simple intimacy for as long as I can...* He had given her a sad smile, and had not argued the point.

Now they lay facing one another, elbows under heads, mirroring one another in position. Kathee looked at him expectantly.

"Do you remember the wildflowers? You are...so...like...the..." It was hard to speak past the lump in his throat.

"How do you mean?" The long, blond hair spread over the pillow, and he reverently picked up its corn-silk straight tresses to press against his face. He was reminded of the nightly ritual of brushing Varina's raven curls, a ritual begun the night he had rescued her; the night *she* had rescued him from an eternity of loneliness.

Then... "The wildflowers last on this earth for such a short time..."

"Cut that out! I'm just crippled, not terminally ill!"

"Oh, but you are. It's the condition of all mortals."

Her eyes took on a fearful look. "Are you crazy after all?" She went on deliberately, "Did I make a mistake bringing you home?"

Nicholas sighed, and looked down. "Perhaps you did, but you have nothing to fear from me." He put a finger under her chin to tilt it up. She saw the anguish there.

"All right! I promise not to bolt! Just tell me this deep, dark secret of yours!"

"Ah... Do you remember this afternoon...when you asked if I were a serial killer?"

Her mouth opened, her eyes widened, her breath came raggedly... He wasn't kidding! Was he assuring her that no matter what he was, that *she* was not going to be his next victim?! She struggled for control. *He had said he wouldn't hurt her! She had to believe him!*

Nicholas smiled in spite of himself. "No, I'm not a serial killer. But what I told you after that was the truth. I *am* a vampire."

Kathee broke out in a fit of giggles. "So you're not dangerous, you're just crazy. I can live with that!" She gave him a big grin.

"I'm not crazy, Kathee. And I'm not lying." He was deadly serious, stressing each word, making her meet his eyes.

"Then why didn't you drink my blood?!" She was still caught in fits of quietly hysterical laughter.

"Because I couldn't be dishonest with you. I care too much--far too much."

She really looked at him, then, seeing the sincerity in his eyes and in his face.

"Love me in *that* way, then. I wondered why you were so reluctant and

unaccustomed..." A thought suddenly occurred to her. "You don't kill your lovers, do you?!"

The first genuine smile in some minutes came to him, and he laughed with an honesty that was untinged with anything except good feelings. "No, hardly that. You would not be harmed."

"Then show me." It wasn't that she believed him. It was just that she trusted him at this point, and was willing to go--and find out--wherever he might care to lead.

* * *

Morning. When he awoke, she lay nestled in the crook of his arm, still sleeping deeply, their bodies still intertwined. He smoothed the pale silk away from her brow. She stirred in her sleep. He reached forward and kissed one high, young breast just above the nipple, then kissed it again on the nipple itself.

She awoke. "Nicholas!" The words came out as a mock reprimand. She broke out in squealing giggles as he tickled her, and their laughter started a wrestling match in the bed. Abruptly, she surrendered, her mood changing as she looked at him in wonder. "You *were* telling the truth. You're *not* crazy!"

"No, I'm not." His smile was completely genuine, now, and he was relaxed. No more lies. She had accepted him.

Kathee sat up. "That was the most incredible thing I've ever felt--your fangs at my throat, your fingers..." She blushed and stifled a giggle. Nicholas would have blushed along with her had he been able. "Well, you've got to admit, it surpasses your most exotic erotic fantasy..."

"Erotic fantasies? Aren't you a bit young for those?"

"Dirty pool!" She hit him with the pillow. "But you more than made up for any expectations I might ever have had about what a man is supposed to do with a woman. I'm going to remember last night for the rest of my life. You've spoiled me. I don't think...ordinary sex...could ever be that good..."

He looked at her quizzically.

"All right, so I *don't* have any basis for comparison... But after what I felt..." She smiled again. "You know that you've left me with something that no one else--vampire *or* human--can ever come up to, don't you?"

"That was never my intention."

"Wasn't it?"

That took him by surprise. He tried to examine his own feelings. Could she possibly be right?! If she was, he was being very inconsiderate as well as very stupid. One of the things he had always been so careful of was not to make any permanent ties, never to leave someone behind yearning for what could not continue... In fact, his goal was always to help if he could and certainly never to harm those from whom he took nourishment.

But in a way, he had already been stupid, since he had told her the truth about his nature. Damn it, she was right. He *had* wanted to give her an experience she would never forget, and it looked like he had succeeded...

"Nicholas... I can tell that when you go away I'll never see you again... Love me one more time?"

He crushed her to him, his emotions threatening to overwhelm him. *If it were not for Varina... He would do it, for both of them. He wanted the memories as much as she did...his exquisite mountain flower...* He started the kisses with her eyes, then softly explored her face. He briefly kissed her chin, then gently laved the tiny fang marks he had made in the the night. She moaned, expecting him to break the skin again. "No, not yet..." His voice was husky. He continued down between her breasts, then kissed each nipple as he gently cupped each one with his strong hands. She moaned with the incredible feelings that washed over her, the burning that had begun between her legs. He continued downward; it was only when it seemed her passion could go no higher that he moved ever so slightly to enter the large vein just inside her thigh... The spiraling passion took them both.

This time Nicholas *did* give her memories that she would never forget, and drank in his own pleasure from hers as if they shared one skin, so that when he drew away from her they both were totally lost to the world...

* * *

Murdoc reached out with his finely tuned senses. Yes, things could not possibly be going better. Nicholas was sotted with pleasure, and Varina was quite another matter. He laughed with pleasure at the anticipation of his plans. All was right with the world.

******

[MacGyver first met Nicholas and Varina and found out that Murdoc was a vampire in "The Truth About Murdoc," which appeared in the first issue of Good Guys Wear Fangs. MacGyver and Kathee, Nicholas and Varina (after this short time-out for R&R!) will again encounter Murdoc for another action/adventure tale in a future issue of GGWF.]

Barb '93

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* * *

Diana Smith and Pat Dunn have also written numerous other "fannish" stories which are NOT about vampires in the universes of BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, BLAKE'S SEVEN, DR. WHO, SHADOW CHASERS, PHANTOM OF THE OPERA, ZORRO, and QUANTUM LEAP. For a listing of these stories and where they can be obtained, SASE to Diana Smith and Pat Dunn, 5985 Yukon St. #5 Arvada, CO 80004.

Facing page: Nicholas Tannek

QUESTIONS OF THE FUTURE FROM THE PAST

You think it will be over once you become mortal again
Don't you, Nicholaus?
You think that all the "bad" feelings you have,
All the feelings that have led you to where you are,
Will disappear just because you will be able to die
Like every other mortal.
I am your teacher, Nicholaus.
I know you better than any other could.
You need to feel the power, the control,
You won't be able to live without it.
And even if you do become mortal
And even if you manage to live without all that you've had
For the last eight hundred years,
Do you honestly believe that the memories will stop?

-Michelle Christian

NICHOLAUS

I walk the lands forever
And see more than any man was ever meant to see.
I have traveled the roads of the past
Lost to my own humanity and in search of my soul.
I fly through the air of night
Seducing the stars and fleeing from the sun.
I will live forever, yet have no future
Condemned by the One True Light.
For what I have done, I am damned;
For what I do now, I am rejected.
And I no longer ask for what I once wanted:
For Eternity to be mine to hold.
Now I simply wait a wonder
If my night will end.

-Michelle Christian

FREEDOM

Why couldn't you let me go?
I had nothing you could need
And you were powerful enough
To bring thousands across,
If you had wanted to.
But you didn't.
Did you chase me because I your pride?
Did you honestly think I left
Just to spite you?
Did your pride not allow you
To let even one person leave you?
Why did you chase me?
I ask this and think of
The picture of you I carry,
Of my inability to fight you,
Of how hard it was when I
Finally had to kill you.
And I end up asking myself,
Why couldn't I let you go?

-Michelle Christian

H. WEST.

WAITING FOR FOREVER

I stand always at the edge of the horizon
I stand always looking to the east.
But always I turn away before the new day,
Unable to see what I most want to have.
I stand always looking behind me,
Always regretting what I have done,
Unable to do anything more than regret,
Forever condemned for my actions,
Forever damning myself.
I stand always quiet in the darkness
I stand always hoping for the future,
Hoping that someday I'll be able to end this curse,
That I'll someday be able to stand and watch
The sunrise in the morning.
That someday I'll be able to remember
More from my past than things to regret.
And until then,
I'll stand and wait.

-Michelle Christian

ROBIN OF SHERWOOD was a highly successful retelling of the Robin Hood legend, which first aired on British television from 1983-85, then later on the U.S. cable station SHOWTIME. Currently it is being shown on various Public Television stations. Featuring a young cast playing young people, it put a different perspective on the traditional legend by having Robin's spiritual father be Herne, the antlered god of the ancient English woodlands.

In the first two seasons, Robin i' the Hood, formerly Robin of Loxley, was played by actor Michael Praed, who brought a new believibility and appeal to a time-worn role. In episode one he rescues Lady Marion from the clutches of the sorcerer Baron de Belleme, and she become his May bride. Through subsequent episodes, Robin and the merries fight against not only Norman tyranny, in the form of the Sheriff of Nottingham and his steward, Guy of Gisburne, but also Templars, mercenaries, and practitioners of black magic.

However, despite being the chosen son the the god Herne, Robin Hood was still mortal. At the close of the second season, he sacrifices his own life to save that of Marion and his foster-brother, Much, and dies alone on a sunset-reddened tor on the edge of Sherwood Forest.

A third season continued the adventure with the lead role being taken on by Jason Connery, who played Herne's second son, the young nobleman Robert of Huntingdon, also known as Robin Hood.

TO DIE FOR II: SON OF DARKNESS (1990) was a sequel to the low budget flick TO DIE FOR. In SON OF DARKNESS, the vampire Max Schreck (played by Michael Praed) seeks to erase centuries of vampiric killing by turning from the old ways and finding new means of getting sustenance. Having become a doctor, he accesses the blood at the local hospital. However, his demented brother Tom will have none of his plans and seeks to oust Max, who is in reality Vlad Tepish, from his position as head of the vampires. Max, however, presses on--and happens, in the course of his work, to meet Nina Black, a young mother driven to distraction by her adoptive son who can tolerate neither sunlight nor human food. In a flash of insight, Max realizes that the child is his half-turned son. He proceeds to court Nina, but disaster awaits, both in the form of the malevolent Tom and in the vampire hunter Martin Planting, whose former lover was the mother of Max's child.

ARROWS OF DARKNESS

by

Janet P. Reedman

Nightfall cloaked the sky in a shroud of purple. A thin and sickly rind of moon floated out of a tangle of autumnal trees to cast bleak, wandering light over the buildings of Kirklees Abbey.

On the track that wound around the bottom of Abbey hill, two travelers bound for York blew on chilled hands and wished they were near an inn. "D'you think the good sisters would put us up, Jankin?" one man asked the other, rubbing his numb fingers on the front of his rough jerkin. "Maybe we could even find a warm bed!" He winked and nudged his companion in the ribs; everyone was familiar with the rumors, true or not, that said the goodly sisters were a right randy lot.

The other man harumphed and drew his cloak more tightly around his lanky frame. "Shouldn't think so, Tammany lad. The former Abbess Gertrude was a tough old tyrant from what I've heard, and they say her replacement, Mother Sybel, is even worse! She's so pious she sits in her cell all day, and only wanders out at night! If she ever needs to attend to the Abbey's duties by day, she wears a cowl to cover every bit of skin. I've heard she believes living in 'Satan's darkness' will one day make her nearer to 'God's light'."

Tammany snorted. "Bollocks. She's probably just bloody ugly... Eh, what's that up ahead?" He pointed into the gathering webs of twilight.

A hundred yards away, caught in a snarl of elder, was a cowled figure, hunched over as if trying to avoid detection. No sign of hands and face were visible in the black robes.

Jankin let out a short laugh. "Well, bugger me, I wouldn't be surprised of that was Abbess Sybel herself. Wonder what she's up to, out in the forest after dark?"

Tammany leered into the shadows. "Maybe the holy mother has got herself a lover. Hmmm...maybe she's not quite so ugly after all..."

"Should we follow her?" asked Jankin. "Just out of curiosity, like. And Hell, who knows, there might be someone willing to pay to hear sommat that'll bring the Abbess of Kirklees. It's a rich house; there's always someone scheming to take over if the head should fall from grace."

Tammany nodded, as eager to see the errant abbess's face unveiled as anything else. "Let's follow, let's follow. Hurry, before we lose track of her!"

The men stumbled in the direction of Abbess Sybel had taken. She wasn't easy to track, for she seemed to have left no signs of passage: no broken boughs or bent blades of grass. But eventually, the wanderers heard muffled moans and knew they had found their quarry.

"Knew it!" tittered Jankin. "She's got a lover!"

Quietly, Tammany reached out and pushed a clump of branches aside. In a small, moon-drenched clearing a man and woman lay entwined in a close embrace. The man was sprawled on his back, his face obscured by the shadow of a spreading tree. The other figure, the abbess, straddled his body, the pale moonlight beating off her naked back.

"God's teeth, she's a beauty!" muttered Tammany, staring enthralled, a silly grin on his face.

Sybel was obviously young by the smoothness of her flesh and her firm buttocks. White-gold hair cascaded to her waist, streaming in rivers about her as she bent over the man's writhing form, her lips firmly fastened to his neck.

Suddenly the man beneath her gave one heave and fell still. The abbess turned her head slightly, as if listening for something. Then, disengaging herself from the prone man, she rose and walked steadily towards Jankin and Tammany's hiding spot, clad only in a capering shadows cast by the wind-tossed trees.

The two men stared nervously at each other. How could she have known they were there? Why would she approach them as if she had nothing to fear? Why did her paramour not move to defend her?

She now stood within several feet of them. Shadows still mantled her, as did tendrils of her long, thick hair. "You can cease to hide," she said in a low gravelly voice that sent shivers down both their spines. "I know you are there."

Tammany grabbed his friend's sleeve. "Jankin, maybe this wasn't a good idea..."

Jankin frowned and shook his head. "For Christ's sake, she's only a woman, and she couldn't get more vulnerable..." Snatching his companion's arm, he yanked him into the clearing.

Abbess Sybel simply stood watching them. "You are fools," she said contemptuously, "and soon you will be dead fools."

Jankin bridled. "I beg to differ, 'Reverend Mother'." He swaggered arrogantly, sure of his position. "You're standing there, bare as the day you were born with your leman lyin' passed out on the grass, and you think you can threaten *us*?"

Abbess Sybel began to laugh. It was a terrible sound, harsh and raucous as the cawing of crows. The moon, passing west, was filling the glade with more light now, and they could see her face, slender and pale and beautiful, with wide midnight eyes--but such a look of malice, that both men quailed.

"What idiots you are!" she cried, and her voice had deepened, until it seemed almost bestial. Running her hands through her long vibrant hair, she tossed the gleaming mass back over her shoulders--and for the first time, they saw the drying blood smeared all over her torso and taut white breasts. And that's when they realized her 'lover' was not...he was her victim.

Her laughter soared up to the unfeeling heavens. "Don't you desire me?" she mocked. "Am I not lovely to behold?"

"Run for it!" Jankin whispered hoarsely to Tammany...but neither man could move; both felt as if trapped within a sticky spider's web.

Sybel slid up to Tammany, the younger and more comelier of the pair. Taking his rigid hand, she drew it to her breast, as cold and hard and unwelcoming as the breast of a marble statue. Her fathomless eyes sucked him in. "You shall both do nicely," she said, and the tips of her two long canine teeth glinted in the moonlight. "Your blood shall held feed my strength. And I will need my strength, for soon I seek better prey--nay, not prey, but one whom I can hold as slave for a millennia if I choose--Robin i' the Hood, Herne's Son!"

Neither man could move a muscle, as she wrapped her arms around the neck of the transfixed Tammany. Neither man could speak or scream, locked under the Abbess's spell.

They only had time to die.

Floating passionlessly over the forest, only the moon bore witness.

*

Robin of Loxley rolled on his side, dislodging Marion's knee where her leg had been thrown over his body. He began to shiver violently, and hastily reached for his discarded clothing. Gazing up into the trees, he saw the sky covered with an ominous layer of swiftly-moving clouds. Summer had vanished, blown down towards

the sea on the breath of the winter witch. Even the leaves were beginning to tumble, skittering in disarray around the glade in which he'd spent the night with Marion. The season of death fast approached Sherwood...and he knew he would not live to see it, that the death he smelt on the chill wind was his own.

He cradled his head in his hands, long strands of dark hair falling between the slender fingers. *Who is the Greatest Enemy?* Herne's cryptic words echoed through his mind, tolling like bells of doom. Too well Loxley understood the meaning of those words, knew that he, like his forebears, God's chosen sons time out of mind, must lay down his life so that his dream could live on.

But why so soon? his mind screamed. He glanced at Marion, still blissfully asleep on their bed of moss. To think, by the next nightfall, he would be fodder for the crows, never to see her, hold her, touch her again... The harsh truth of it rushed up in terrifying awfulness, and he pushed the thought out of his mind, playing a game of 'pretend' that was normally foreign to him. Maybe Herne had meant differently than he imagined, maybe the Wheel would turn back for him as it once had for Marion...

A low moan escaped his lips as his hand brushed against a painful spot on the side of his neck. He had noticed a mark there a week or so back; a pair of faint punctures, red and swollen. At first he had shrugged the marks off as being cuts accidentally inflicted while shaving himself...although they were rather low on his throat and he couldn't remember having had such an accident. Then, when the wounds hadn't healed, he had briefly entertained the thoughts of some dire illness...but Tuck reassured him the boils associated with plague were quite different.

But now the slashes were doubly painful, and he felt nauseous, the faint sunlight slanting through the trees making him hot and feverish despite its lost intensity.

Absently he rubbed at the marks on his neck; his fingers came away crusted in blood. He stared down at the red flakes dotting his fingertips.

His attention was drawn away from his discomfort by a soft sigh from Marion. Awake, she sat up on the moss, a vision of loveliness with her curls aflame in the weak sunlight. Loxley smiled, intent on hiding his distress, and he gathered her slender form into his arms.

The wind was soughing around them, breathing of death on its mournful voice, but he refused to listen. It seemed impossible when Marion was warm and alive, her lithe body pressed against his, her heartbeat one with his, her hands arousing fire in his loins. *Live, live!* an inner voice cried, as he tumbled with her back onto the moss, the leaves drifting about them, sticking to his heated flesh.

Suddenly Marion paused, giving a little shriek. "Robin! You're bleeding!" She held up her hand which had inadvertently brushed against his neck. A daub of fresh blood marred the palm.

Robin immediately sobered, his desire dampened. He pressed his fingers to the wound. "It's only a scratch, Marion...but I suppose I should have Tuck have a look at it. We ought to be getting back to camp anyway; time is...passing." He winced.

"Robin, ever since you spoke with Herne yesterday, you've frightened me. You've been so...ardent, and yet so distant." Lovingly, she reached out to brush his bangs from his forest-green eyes. "What's going on? I'm afraid. Is trouble brewing? Are you ill? You don't look well..."

He almost burst out and told her the whole truth then, but he bit down on his traitorous tongue and glanced aside, afraid that his candid eyes would betray him more surely than any words... "Marion, I can't really answer you. All I know is that fate will carry us where it will...but whatever happens, I will always love you."

She stared at her husband in surprise. He seldom spoke endearments, even when they made love; it was not in his nature or upbringing. And she had not needed reassurance--she had always known how much he loved her. So, it startled--and unnerved her--to hear him speak in such a manner now.

"Robin..." she began, reaching out to him, but he was on his feet, adjusting his garments, and then he was hurrying into the fastness of Sherwood.

Hastily Marion threw on her own garb and followed him. She did not want to let him go, not alone; her instincts screamed against it.

However, fixed as they were on Robin, her instincts did not sense a presence lurking in the dense foliage. And she would hardly have noticed, except perhaps with a sense of perplexity, the bent figure swathed from head to toe in a nun's cowl, who hobbled through the undergrowth towards a destination unknown.

*

Sunset. Robin stood alone on the tor, bathed in dying light as red as the life's blood that pumped through his veins. All day long, all that he had done had gone amiss, and now the hour of reckoning was nigh. Sadness and fear knotted his belly, but there was gladness in his heart, too--Marion and Much had escaped before the soldiers hemmed them in, and even now they were fleeing for safety, bearing his dream away to live in their hearts forever.

As the twilight deepened, becoming the hue of rich wine, he smiled down mockingly at Robert de Rainault, eager and yet terrified as he sat astride his impatient steed. Eager for his blood. Terrified that what he desired would not be fulfilled.

Robin felt a new strength flood him; it was as if, with the waning of the day, his strength waxed tenfold. He didn't understand why, since he had been feeling weak and listless since morn, his fighting poorly timed, his thinking muddled. Perhaps now he experienced the last flaming of the brand that had ignited the blaze of justice in his heart, ere it guttered into darkness.

He could hear the tramp of feet on stone behind him, and knew the Sheriff's crossbowmen crowded at his back. No escape was left to him. He smiled mockingly. *You will never win, de Rainault!* and he fired a final arrow into the bluing east as a tribute to all that had gone before and all that would happen in the future. A future that would not contain Robin of Loxley.

Then, with one mighty effort, he broke his longbow over his knee, not even feeling the pain as it snapped and splintered. Clattering, the pieces fell amongst the rocks and he stood, hands empty, waiting.

Seven crossbows sang their song of death...

And a score of angry soldiers rushed up to the tor to hack the fallen body of their enemy...

And Robert de Rainault, Sheriff of Nottingham, breathed, "At last," unaware that his trials with Herne's Son were far from over...

And in the eves of the forest, a white-gold woman threw back her head and laughed, for soon all her desires would be fulfilled...

*

De Rainault's soldiers laboured under the weight of the body that had once been Robin of Loxley. In life, he had been a slender man, although tall; but, as was usual, the corpse weighed like a millstone. Perhaps their own guilty consciences weighed heavily on the men as well, making their burden seem all the greater. More than one Nottingham soldier had Saxon blood in his veins and secretly admired the daring young wolfshead who had the audacity to defy the nobility.

"Why did we get saddled with this bloody goddawful job?" one lanky soldier asked his fellow. "Why ain't the Sheriff takin' him back to Nottingham? Won't King John want to view the body?"

"The Sheriff is scared," grumbled the other. "Somethin' ain't canny here...or didn't you notice?"

"What do you mean?" said the lanky man, uncomfortable, peering over his shoulder as if expecting some wood-wight to grab him.

The other soldier fixed him with a stare. "The wolfshead's wounds...they were nowhere near as bad as they should've been, with all those swords and arrows. He

should've, by all rights, been ripped apart. But no, it was as if no sword could do more than wound..."

Lanky shifted uncomfortably. "Well, they do say he was the son of Herne the Hunter. I'll bet he's surrounded with some devilish magic. At least we know he's dead, though--he ain't breathin'."

"Hope you're right," said the other, shrugging. "Remember the goin's on with Belleme?"

"I don't want to remember."

The two soldiers suddenly jumped in fright as a cowled shape appeared unexpectedly on the path before them. "Who the hell goes?" asked Lanky, groping for his sword hilt.

"Just a holy woman, a hermitess," came a hoarse, croaking reply. "Much evil has happened in Sherwood this day, and I come to see why two soldiers, carrying a burden, wander near my cell after dark."

"We come to cast the body of the wolfshead Robin Hood out for his brothers, the wolves," said Lanky. "On the Sheriff's orders."

"Robin Hood," breathed the cowled figure. "Let me see him."

"I don't know..." began Lanky's companion uneasily.

The hermitess pushed back a fold of her cowl and her intense gaze fell on the man. "I think you will, good soldier," she said in a low voice.

The man gazed into her strangely ageless eyes and shudders of fear rippled down his spine. Nonetheless, he muttered, "Yes," as timidly as if he were a frightened maid, and he laid his end of the burden on the ground. His companion went to argue, but likewise received a stare from the woman which silenced him. He, too, laid his end of the burden on the grass.

The hunched figure knelt beside the enfurled body and slowly drew back the sodden cloak. A long, indrawn breath sounded as Loxley's face, pale but oddly serene and unmarred, was revealed. Then the covering was pulled lower, to reveal gaping mortal wounds, raw and purple, although the bright flow of blood had ceased. "Oh, it is better than I hoped...," the woman whispered, running her fingers over the edges of the wounds. "Praise be, they did not sever his head."

The two soldiers, both feeling strangely disoriented, gazed at the woman, and then at the body of Loxley. Vaguely they felt that something was grossly amiss, but their minds could not comprehend, could not accept, exactly what it was. After all, they knew it was impossible for a dead man's wounds to start to close, impossible for the faintest trace of colour to appear in a bloodless face deprived of oxygen...

"Lady, we must be on our way to do the Sheriff's bidding," said Lanky dazedly, gesturing to the inert body of Loxley.

The woman peered up at the man, eyes hot within the folds of her nunly garb. "What you do is un-Christian!" she said. "He's dead...that should satisfy your Sheriff. Leave him to me, and I shall bury him with the rites he deserves. Maybe God will have pity on his misguided outlaw soul." She made a sound that could have either been a harsh laugh or a grating sob.

"But the Sheriff said...," began Lanky.

The woman's eyes fastened with his again, making his feel strangely light-headed. Why couldn't he just push this demented crone out of the way?

Beside him his fellow made a noise, as if an idea had just been planted in his usually dim brain. "Eh, maybe we *should* leave 'im with her. Save us a journey--and possibly running into 'is sympathizers. Also, if 'e's buried underground, with Christian rites an' all, maybe we won't fear 'im comin' back like the Baron!"

Lanky seemed to think this was an awfully wise plan. He nodded dumbly, like an idiot. "So be it. Keep him, crone, and bury him deep."

"Where the sun will never shine," said the woman, uttering another brief sound that was either amusement or muffled sobbing...

The soldiers glanced at each other, and then, fear gripping their innards, rushed away from the crone and the corpse of Robin of Loxley.

And the "hermitess" cast back her cowl from masses of white-gold hair, and

bent to kiss the dead man's cold unresponsive lips.

*

He woke in utter darkness, terror lancing through his belly. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. Panicked, he groped at his chest as images tumbled through his mind: an arrow landing beneath his right arm, rending flesh and crushing ribs; being thrown forward as other bolts slammed into his back. Blood...blood in fountains everywhere, and the sky above receding into utter darkness...

He was dead...he *had* to be dead, for no mortal could sustain such injuries and live. But, somehow, he was not convinced. At first, he had felt his...*spirit?* try to leave his body, to fly free over Sherwood. But abruptly, it had been sucked back to the ruined shell of his body. The feeling had not been wholesome, and pain...oh Herne, the pain!

He struggled to sit, as some feeling returned to his numb fingers. Eyes adjusting to the darkness with amazing rapidity, he realized he was in a stone vault. Stone coffins were stacked around him; bones gleamed in niches in the moss-stained walls.

He gasped in alarm as he recognized his own resting place as a stone coffin, complete with drainage hole to allow the seepage of a corpse's noxious fluids. Had he accidentally been buried alive? But why would the Sheriff see a mere wolfshead laid out in such a manner? He also realized that his "bed" had deliberately been made comfortable; there were rich quilts above and below him.

"So you are awake. I am glad. I feared perhaps your injuries were too severe even for my powers to heal. And that would have been a pity indeed." A rich, woman's voice rang out in the crypt.

Robin stared in the direction of the narrow doorway. A woman glided with a cat's lithe grace towards him. She was clad in the garb of an abbess, humble and modest, but as she reached the foot of the coffin, she yanked the robes over her head, to reveal a curvaceous body draped only in a thin shift that left little to his imagination. He was strangely reminded of Morgwyn and her black coven, and he shuddered.

"You need not fear *me*," she said softly. "I saved your life."

"You? But how can that be? They shot me..." He closed his eyes wearily; he could not possibly be alive, unless some power interceded...

"Oh, I saved you, be sure of that," said the woman, "I am called Sybel, and my powers are many."

He opened his green eyes again and looked up into her beautiful alabaster face. "Why? What can you want with me?"

Surprise flitted over her features. "Surely you did not wish to die?"

"It was my destiny," he choked.

She frowned. "Nonsense. We can oft choose our own destinies...or rework them, at any rate."

"I don't understand..."

Sensuously she stroked a long finger over his lips, silencing him. "I foresaw your death months ago, Robin Hood. For I had been watching you. I wept for you...such beauty, such power! So I set about saving you in the best way I knew...a way that would also make you mine."

Loxley opened his mouth to protest, but again Sybel silence him. "Your friends guard you too well many nights, as did your woman. I could not come near you. But on occasion, when they wandered away for a few moments, I came and took from you, changed you. I had hoped to...make you before the day of reckoning came, but as I have told you, it was hard to get you alone. But what I did in those moments could was enough to save you; your "death" on the tor appeared as such to mortal eyes, but it will now take more than mortal arrows and swords to slay Robin of Loxley."

Robin shook his head, beginning to understand, yet not wanting to. "What are you saying? What have you done to me?"

She leaned over him, lips mere inches from his face. He could see her eyes glowing, the tips of long, white teeth pushing at her full lips. "I have made you immortal, Robin of Loxley. Immortal."

"But what of Marion and the others..."

"She is in your past. Forget her. For everything there is a price, and I shall make sure it is not *too* dear to pay," she purred, running a hand down his chest to rest on his thigh. "Ah, your wounds have nearly healed," she continued, "and soon you will be able to come to my bed."

"You're mad!" he gasped, horrified by the prospect. His head reeled as he was overwhelmed by the truth of what had occurred. This woman...this creature...had saved him--but by the use of sorcery and for foul purposes of her own.

"I am not mad. I merely seek a mate who is my own match in beauty, strength and intelligence. I have been alone for years...hundreds and hundreds of years."

"I am a free man...I cannot be bound!" he gasped harshly, and with an effort, he sprang from the stone coffin and raced as well as his unsteady legs could bear him, towards the exit of the crypt.

"No!" shrieked Sybel, absolute panic in her cry as he gained the stairs and flew up them. "Robin, you fool, you mustn't let daylight touch your flesh!"

Robin ignored her and continued to run. He could see a faint grey light ahead but, for some obscure reason, the sight filled him with trepidation rather than elation. Still, he plowed onwards until he stumbled out into a grey kirkyard.

And he screamed and collapsed back into the darkness of the stairwell. Sobs tearing unbidden from his throat, he crouched in the shadows, arms clasped protectively aver his head. He was burnt; his skin was raw and peeling. Yet the sun had only touched him for an instant...

"I warned you!" Sybel's long-nailed handed gripped his shoulder, pulling him back towards the crypt. "Haven't you digested what I've been telling you? You are not as other men any more...I have made you immortal, I have made you what the men of the east name 'wamphyr'. You can never face the sun again, even as I cannot."

Still in agony, he shook his head. "Your words are meaningless, sorceress..."

"Ah. Wamphyri...vampires...the word *would* be unfamiliar to you. You now belong to a race that will live forever--but you will need blood to flourish. Preferably human blood, although beasts will do if one is...desperate."

Robin dropped his hands from his burned face and gazed at her in complete horror. "You...you...have made me a monster! Herne protect me, I should have died on the tor...I...I want to die rather that live like this, feeding off the innocent like a parasite!"

"Feed off the hated Normans if you find other ways so abhorrent," Sybel said tossing her hair.

"No I could not."

"Don't be stupid!" Her lips curled and he saw her fangs revealed, glowing in the gloom of the crypt. "You would weaken and wither...until you became a shriveled creature, like a lich. But you would not die."

"You...you..." he choked at a loss for words.

"Oh come, I tire of your noble protestations. You will live as a king...forever. The world can be ours together." With a sinuous motion, she let her shift fall to the floor. She stretched like a cat, displaying long, supple legs and thighs, and upturned breasts like frosted hills on which dusky spring rosebuds had just begun to blossom. She ran her hands down Robin's body, her lips seeking the sensitive spot on his neck, where she'd stolen blood before, and had set her seal and her curse on him. "Let me drink from you, and then drink from me," she murmured in his ear. "Then we shall be bound for all time."

The waves of almost unnatural desire that washed over him did not yet cloud his brain beyond reason. He managed to shove her away. "What you want will never be..." he gasped. "Never."

Her face twisted into a hideous mask. Her lips rippled over her fangs as she snarled, "You will not speak to me in such a way. You will do my bidding."

Anger exploded inside him...a type of anger he had never felt before. To his

horror, he found himself changing, his own teeth growing as Sybel's had done, his eyes darkening with wrath until they became black as the pits of hell. "i will not have you..." he said, his eyes a raw, unfamiliar growl in his chest.

"Bastard!" she shrieked. "How dare you scorn me when I have given you the greatest of all gifts!"

"It's a curse you have given me."

She sprang at him, fighting and biting, possessed by a wild fury. Her strength was unnatural, impossible, and at first he fell back. overwhelmed and unbelieving. But then his own anger ignited once again in white-hot rage, and he struck out with his arm, flinging her across the room. Crouching, he growled at her, although he fought the bestial emotions roiling inside him.

Expression livid and yet wary, Sybel backed off. "You are a complete idiot, Robin of Loxley," she snarled, snatching up her fallen robes and donning them with agitated motions, hiding all flesh in their austere folds. "You scorn me, and hence your only chance to have any life at all. You *need* me...but you will have to be forced to see it--that is obvious. I will leave you now, leave you until you are so revolted by your own shriveled flesh, so driven by your need to feed, that you will claw through the very ceiling into the abbey to beg me forgiveness. I *might* be merciful. If you are lucky."

Swiftly as a striking adder, Sybel darted up the stairs leading from the crypt. The sound of a slamming door followed her departure.

Robin released an enraged cry that was scarcely human. Then he knelt down, helpless and alone, with only the shadows for companions, and in his grief and despair, that long night was far from beautiful.

*

Time passed, an indeterminate time. Robin remained in the crypt, pacing the uneven flagstones like a caged animal. Occasionally, he thought of Marion and his men, but they had become as dreams to him, memories of a life now lost. He did not hope they would find out he was...alive? They were sundered from him forever.

Of greater concern to him was his own well-being. Vaguely he realized he was shrinking--not decaying, like a corpse, but drying out, like a discarded husk. The thought sickened him, and yet, what could he do? He was also plagued by desire--a desire for blood that was almost sexual in its intensity. Images of Sybel's perfect body and the sustenance and bonding she offered leaped through his mind, tormenting him further.

Then, at last, the abbess visited the crypt. Night had fallen; Loxley knew that, for he always felt fresher and stronger after dusk. "You look poorly," Sybel said sarcastically, approaching him and running a finger across his cheek. "Withered like a dying leaf."

"If I am so repugnant, leave me be." He turned his back to her.

She reached out, and whirled him around. "You can be restored in an instant. All your youth, beauty, vigor and vitality returned to you. If you cleave to me."

He was silent, struggling with his emotions. He didn't want to be some blood-sucking leech, and yet this present existence was truly a living death.

Sybel noticed him wavering, and smiled lasciviously. "I knew you'd eventually see sense," she said. "Come, Robin."

Tentatively, he staggered to the vampire. She put her hands on either side of his head and kissed him hard on the mouth, her tongue running over his teeth, which, as desire gripped him, began to grow. "Oh, very good," she said. "Now we two shall become as one...but not in the way which mortals are accustomed. You will drink from me, regain some strength...then I will take from you, to complete the bond."

Carefully she unlaced her black kirtle and shrugged it off her ivory shoulders. With daggered nails, she drew a red line across the top of her exposed breast. "There...," she said, "feed from me, and I shall be as your mother and your lover forever after."

Robin's stomach heaved, but the sight of her blood was driving him mad. Shaking, he grabbed Sybel and sank his fangs into the place she had indicated. He drank deeply, his whole body quivering, taking more, more, more...while she moaned in ecstasy of her own, her eyes flaming with the joy of victory.

And then she was pushing him away, straightening her gown even as the wound began to heal of its own accord. She gazed at Robin critically. "You're much improved, but you still look weak and pasty. You need a proper feeding--with blood full of the fear that makes our kind strong. I cannot share with you until then, as the sharing would disable you, drain what little strength you've regained."

He was silent, loathing himself but unable to deny what Sybel was saying.

"Fear not," continued the false abbess. "I anticipated this problem." She rustled towards the door. "I'll return shortly."

Robin watched her depart, full of dread and yet anticipation, his limbs tingling, his mind alive. What he did was wrong, but it seemed he had little choice...

And then Sybel returned, leading a girl by the hand. She was obviously one of the novices, a pretty child of perhaps fourteen, with long golden braids and wide blue eyes. She wore her heavy, coarse sleeping gown, and appeared dazed, as if under some sort of hypnotic spell.

Robin stared, horrified, even as his bloodlust flared again. He couldn't harm her...she was only a child. "Must I...kill her?" he croaked.

"She won't be missed," said Sybel lightly. "Her father stuck her in Kirklees because she hadn't a big enough dowery to gain a decent husband. She didn't want to come here; she's threatened to run away many times. No one will wonder if she goes missing."

Robin shook his head, tongue running uncomfortably over his hated fangs. "I can't do it. Not if she'll die."

Sybel's face tightened with anger. "You must, can't you see? I thought you'd learned some sense, and lost you maudlin mortal heart! Look...you won't be able to stop yourself..."

She grabbed the novice by the hair and threw her to the ground at Loxley's feet, where she cowered in a daze. Leaning over like an avenging goddess, Sybel grabbed the girl's collar, fastened high beneath her chin, and ripped the garment open to the waist. Twining the novice's braids around her hand, she yanked her head back so that her long white neck was revealed. The jugular pulsed enticingly.

"No..." Robin murmured, trying to avert his eyes. Red visions swam through his mind. "I can't...I can't...it's murder."

"It's life...for you," hissed Sybel, propping the stunned, ensorcelled girl into an upright position. "Take her...take her, you fool."

She practically hurled the girl into Robin's arms. Her blond head slammed against his shoulder and Loxley took a step backwards, staggering under her dead weight. Her head lolled, revealing the tempting vein and all it promised once again. He gazed at it thirstily; how could he deny himself when his salvation was so near? The last thing he wished to do was hurt the child, but perhaps death would be better than living in the care of Mother Sybel. But then, if he did drink from her, he would be giving *himself* totally to Sybel for an eternity. And the girl would only be the first of many...

"I WON'T!" he cried in sudden agony, and he released his hold on the novice. Unharmed, her limp form slid to the flagstone.

Sybel screamed in rage, and her eyes blazed crimson. "You torment me again! I have grown weary of these games. I desired you and it was the first time I desired a man as more than plaything in centuries. I could have loved you..."

"You're incapable of it." He glared contemptuously at the angry vampyress.

"I could have loved you," she continued, arrogant and unheeding, "but you have toyed with me and kept me waiting--for naught. I will not wait any longer. You have lost your chance, my friend."

"You will kill me?" The thought of death instead of this demonic existence was almost a relief.

"Oh, no." She shook her head, an evil smile playing on her bow-shaped lips. "No stake or beheading or sunlight's rays for you, Loxley. You will have more years in the dark, failing and fading--and I have other plans for you, too--only those I shan't reveal! I want them to be a...surprise."

He tried to make a break for freedom then, to dash past Sybel and run for the nightclad forests beyond Kirklees--but his strength was no match for hers. Twisting his arm cruelly, she dragged him back from the door, pulling him toward the stone coffin he had used when he wished to rest or lie in nightmarish contemplation of his fate. Pushing him inside the grey slab, she began to chant in a low voice...arcane words such as he had heard from the mouths of Morgwyn of Ravenscar and the Baron de Belleme, and he realized she was more than just a blood-drinker; she also had knowledge of the Black Arts. He began to feel tired, weary, his eyelids heavy. Vainly he fought the sensation.

Through waves of exhaustion, he faintly heard the sound of grinding stone, and then an utter darkness engulfed him. Sybel had put the stone lid over the coffin! He pushed at the slab weakly, but his hands and arms were heavy as lead.

Distantly, he could hear the rattle of chains and evil, mocking laughter...and then shadows and haunting dreams reached forth to grip his mind, pulling him into a void of blackness beyond the help of man or god. Herne's Son was truly lost.

*

He was cold, horribly, unbelievably cold. Being what he considered "living dead", he did not expect to experience such sensation, but he most assuredly did. Shivering, he began to push at the cold blanket that seemed to be lying across his limbs.

It was snow.

Gradually, full consciousness returned. With feeble motions, Robin continued to push and claw at the heaps of snow that lay on top of him. Bits of past event flashed through his mind, and he knew he had to free himself from wherever he w before daylight burned him to cinders. But he was weak, so weak...

Still, dogged persistence won out, and after what felt like an eternity, he found himself kneeling in a pile of snow, with a December wind ripping through his hair and the sounds of the night-time world all around.

Warily he glanced around. He was in a graveyard; tombstones stuck up like broken teeth from the death-white gums of an ancient corpse. His coffin-prison lay in a shallow pit of some kind and that, doubtless combined with the unusual cold, had caused the cist to shatter, allowing in the snow...and his escape from his prison. Sybel had tried to bury him alive for eternity, but she had failed.

Weakly, he climbed to his feet. He peered down at himself, uttering a cry of horror that was bourne away on the frigid breeze. His legs were scarcely more than bones wrapped in flesh; likewise, his hands were near-skeletal claws. He could see his ribs jutting through the meager remains of his clothing. He hated to think what his face looked like...no doubt a gaunt horror that would frighten even a hardened soldier, even his friends, even Marion...

He had to get blood soon, any blood...

Glancing across the graveyard, he saw a dark, forbidding row of trees. The type of tree looked completely unfamiliar to him, and he deduced that Sybel must have had his body transported to some distant part of England, possibly Northumbria. Still, the trees were sanctuary, and would contain game to give him sustenance. With a stiff, lumbering gait, he headed toward the shadowy fastness.

Inside the wall of trees, he began to search for animal spoor and soon ran across the trail of a deer. Intently he followed it, his need giving him a burst of much needed energy. Before he had gone many miles, he found the animal--a healthy young buck drinking water from a woodland pond. Head bent, lapping the crystalline waters, the beast was unaware of the wood-wise man who approached upwind, his feet making no sound on the forest floor...

A great urgency possessed Robin, and as a bowstrings is released and the arrow

flies, either to its mark or some other destination, suddenly he lost all control of his emotions. Wild as a beast himself, he crashed through the foliage and pounced on the back of the startled buck even as it tried to shy away. Extended, his teeth sank into its jugular, and the animal went down, Robin clinging desperately to its neck, drinking its life blood, uncaring of the gross blood-spattered spectacle he was making of himself.

Once he had finished, he crawled into the bushes, feeling much healthier and fulfilled, although also vaguely ashamed. Even as he squatted in the gloom, trembling, he could feel his shrunken body filling out, like a plant given water after a long drought. Yet he knew the single feeding wasn't enough. He's have to feed more than once tonight to recover even an ounce of his lost strength, and he'd have to find a place to shelter from tomorrow's daylight as well.

Thanking Herne for assuring his survival by supplying him with one of His children, Robin wandered off into the forbidding woodland to find another meal.

*

By the end of roughly a month, judging by the waxing of the moon, Loxley was as well as could be expected after his ordeal in the coffin. The forest was littered with the corpses of bloodless animals, which he sorely regretted, but at least he was as whole as he could ever be, and no longer a horror women would scream at. He had unmatted his mane of dark hair, bathed in the woodland pools, and sewn himself a new tunic and trousers from the hide of a deer he had killed, using a bone needle fashioned from shards of antlers. His own resourcefulness pleased him--at least the animals' deaths were not idle wastes of life merely to feed a monster's lusts.

By night, of course, he carried out all his hunting: by day he slept or reclined in a small cave in a shallow dell, which he had discovered in his explorations. In all the time he had spent there, recovering form his imprisonment, he had seen no human life, and was glad of it, for he feared the unholy desires the sight of humans might bring upon him. However, vaguely the silence and the loneliness of the unfamiliar wood began to bother the solitary man. He started to dream of his long-lost friends--and of Marion, although in truth he feared meeting her, in case she should be repulsed or terrified by what he had become, or, even worse, if he were filled with lust he could not control when he set eyes upon her. With a faint modicum of hope, he wondered if he could be relieved of his curse by Herne, if the Hunter could turn the Wheel and put his life back on course again.

He had to find out. It was no longer any good hiding. He had gained his strength and would seek for his god in Sherwood.

*

A sad, lonely figure wrapped in moonlight, he began to walk...and the dark woods he left behind seemed to sigh in relief at his passing.

*

The initial leg of Loxley's journey took him south, in what he considered was the general direction of Sherwood forest. For the hundredth time, he was amazed by the darkness and thickness of the forests in this part of England, and also by the amount of snow that lay on the ground, carved into weird shapes by the bitter winds that never ceased to roar out of the North. He had heard the borderlands were strange and bleak places, but he had never imagined *how* strange and bleak.

On the third day out, he found the first habitation of men he had see thus far, and decided that it would be wise to steal a horse. Mounted, he could make a much quicker journey home, especially if he followed Watling Street. Certainly, he

would not have to worry about meeting cutthroats on the road! In an odd way, he was beginning to feel much more positive about being reunited with his band, and even about the prospect of remaining a vampire. He grinned to himself, imagining the sheriff's face if he should appear in Nottingham castle one night, fanged and dangerous, unkillable and unstoppable... Pushing such thoughts aside, he attended to the business at hand and approached the cluster of cottages. They looked even poorer than those in Sherwood, which surprised him; but then again, a hundred years ago William the Bastard had carried out the harrying if the North, and he'd heard oldsters say the land and its people had still not recovered from that black time.

Stealthily, he crept up to the cottage nearest the forest wall. A paddock in the back contained a skinny grey mare who nibbled at a few wisps of grass poking through the frozen ground. Wraith-silent, Robin climbed up over the rickety fence and then sidled up to the dispirited-looking beast. The animal eyed him cautiously, then emitted a fearful whinny and shied away from the approaching man.

At that moment, the cottage door flew open with a resounding bang. A burly man in a furred garment burst into the paddock, waving a large, rusted dagger. His face was red and furious, his eyes popping, his black mustaches bristling straight out. Angrily he screamed at Robin in some strange language unknown to the young man.

Robin stood mystified, while the man stormed towards him, still screaming and bawling, his breath white puffs with every noisy exhalation.

And then, upon coming within a few feet of Loxley, he halted, and his large red cheeks drained and became ashen-grey. Sputtering, he tumbled to his knees before the dark-haired youth, gabbling away in terrified and apologetic tones. Robin could make out nothing of his speech, except two often-repeated words which seemed to be names or titles. However, even these words sounded outlandish and odd to his ears. Rumour had it that Northumbrians were a queer lot, but he hadn't heard that they didn't speak English.

"You don't need to be frightened of me," Robin said to the man, "I am not going to harm you." *I hope...* He reached out with what he hoped was a reassuring hand.

It obviously wasn't. The man cried out and shied away form his touch as if he's been offered a poisonous serpent.

Robin grew a trifle annoyed. *He can't know what I am...* "I told you I wouldn't harm you. Stop shaking! And don't pretend you can speak no English; you must know at least a few words!"

The man rolled his eyes up and put his hand over his head as if to shield himself from blows. Robin frowned down at his groveling form. "This is mad; you don't have to kneel to me..."

A group of other villagers had now appeared, drawn from their hovels by the sound of their fellow's shouts. They stood in a ragged, dispirited semi-circle, their heads wrapped in cloths against the bitter cold, their stocky bodies furled in rude animal pelts.

Robin glanced desperately at the newcomers, as the man before him grabbed his knees and hugged them, his expression one of desperate pleading. "Come on, tell him I won't harm him! Is he simple or what? I've tried telling him..."

The rest of the villagers began bowing and curtsying wildly, gabbling in the same foreign tongue as the man at Robin's feet. They looked nothing so much as a row of bobbing scarecrows. "What's going on?" Robin cried. "One of you must be able to speak to me. By Herne the Hunter, this is England and not some..."

A horrified expression suddenly froze on his face as the ghastly truth dawned on him in a burst of red-hot knowledge. Sybel's revenge was more than binding him into a buried coffin for an unknown time. He was no longer in England, and he had no idea where he had been taken.

Biting back a cry of anguish, he knocked the peasant man aside and raced for the comforting boughs of the tree.

*

Dispirited, Loxley marched along a winding avenue of dark, wintry pines. He had fed on a few rabbits that morning, and with their warm blood within him, he didn't feel a normal man's cold or exhaustion, although dark despair lay on him that was worse than any physical discomfort. He was no longer in England, and there was no way back he knew of. Purposeless, he could only fare on to unknown destinations...

Up ahead, the trees began to thin out, and he discerned the faint traces of a road beneath the packed snow. Crumbling watch towers lined its length; obviously, at one time it had been used for military purposes. Fascinated by this first sign of real "civilization", he started to follow the road, which began to rise as the terrain grew more mountainous.

For several days he traveled onwards, never meeting a soul on that desolate road. He spied the odd village, but almost every one seemed to be abandoned and in ruins. It was as if a great war or plague had passed over the land. At least, he thought, it was no problem to find hiding places to spend the daylight hours.

Gradually the terrain changed again. Rocky hills became true mountains, forked and stern, their vast craggy eyeries soaring up towards heaven. Snow caps twinkled in the dim twilight; clouds billowed like the breath of frost giants, still bloody from the recent sunset. Robin felt oddly attracted to those high, forbidding places; their power and isolation beckoned him, summoned him. He quickened his steps, drawing his fur cape tighter around his shoulders though he hardly noticed the cold.

And then, as if torn asunder on a giant's spear, the mists parted to reveal the first major sign of habitation--a black castle perched upon a black hill. He had never seen such a threatening stronghold; it bore no resemblance to the Norman fortresses of his homeland. The castle was thin and skeletal-looking, a sword blade of somber stone clinging precipitously to the edge of a stony crag. A drop of many hundreds of feet protected the castle's western side from anyone foolish enough to attack. A ragged banner bearing the insignia of a dragon fluttered from the pointed spire of the turret.

Robin hurried toward the castle, not sure why he felt so drawn to its grim walls. But then...what did it matter? Why not explore all that there was to be explored, if eternal life was to be his fate?

Feet silent on the icy flagstone, he strode up the barbican under the raised portcullis, with its rows of rusty spikes like blood-stained fangs. He frowned, wondering why there were no guards. Like most of the local villages, the castle would appear to be abandoned...and yet it still flew some lord's device.

A small, windswept figure, Loxley walked across the bailey, filled with dead leaves and sprouting vegetation that thrust through the cracks in the paving-stones. Reaching a wooden door set in the black wall, he grasped the corroded door-ring and turned it...and the door ground with a faint screech of hinges.

Glancing hither and thither warily, Robin crossed a kitchen filled with long-unused pots and pans, grey and rusty under a coat of dust, and entered a lightless corridor that rose to meet a spiral staircase. Ascending the slime-coated stair, he found himself in another hall--and it was here that he heard the sound of voices raised in anger.

Stealthily, Loxley followed the sound and came at last to a pointed archway leading into the great hall of the castle. Crouching in a side niche overhung by a grinning stone gargoyle, he peered into the room while listening to the voices which, although speaking in a foreign tongue, were clearly discussing a matter of considerable contention.

In the tarnished splendour of the great hall stood two men and a woman. One man, clad in a rich, blood-red velvet jerkin and thigh-high leather boots, was standing with his face towards the window. His back was rigid, his stance uncompromising. The other man, shorter and stockier, was doing most of the shouting, his lips curved in an almost inhuman snarl, his hands balled into fists at his side. His anger seemed first directed at the velvet-clad man, then at the

woman leaning against a long, oak table, her voluptuous mouth curved in a slightly-mocking, or disdainful, smile.

Robin adjusted his position, and took a better look at the woman. She was beautiful--small and lithe as a wood-elf, with wavy mahogany hair that tumbled loose beyond her waist. Pearly skin was set off by slanted, coal-black eyes and a small mouth painted red as blood. She wore a richly decorated gown of dark red hue, made of a fabric Robin had never seen before and cut almost indecently low in the bodice. He felt his blood quicken at the sight of her, though whether it was the sick blood-lust brought on by the curse or the long-suppressed needs of the flesh, he did not know.

The stockier man uttered a low, bestial growl, and suddenly lunged for the woman, catching her by the shoulders and shaking her. Her expression only altered slightly, becoming more contemptuous as his fingers dug into her white flesh. At that moment, the man at the window whirled around, his mane of dark hair flying. In three long strides he was on the other man, wrenching him away from the woman, lifting him off his feet and hurling him with unnatural strength against the wall.

The other man countered almost at once, scrambling upright, then dropping into a crouch, his lips drawn back to reveal...a pair of gleaming fangs. The taller man laughed and assumed a similar stance, with his own fangs extended and his large eyes turned midnight-black.

Robin stared in shock, waves of emotion rushing through him.

The two men he spied upon were vampires.

And one of them wore his own face.

*

The confrontation between the two vampires did not end in the battle the watcher anticipated. The shorter, stockier vampire, casting hateful glances at the woman, suddenly backed off and stalked towards the door, shouting words over his shoulder which anyone could interpret as meaning, "You haven't heard the last of me."

The woman laughed as the man stormed out, passing Robin's hiding place without a single sideways glance. Then in a flurry of robes, she rushed forward into the tall vampire's arms, kissing and caressing him wantonly. "Ilona," he said, lifting her face to kiss her lips, her painted eye-lids.

She embraced him deeply, her long-nailed white fingers running up his strong back, her hips swaying sensuously against his. "Vlad...Dracul..." Robin heard the words the peasants had muttered amongst her breathy exhalations, and realized that Vlad Dracula must be the vampire-lord's name. It was clear to see why the peasants had mistaken him for the other vampire. Vlad's hair was longer and darker, and hid a face a slight bit leaner and more mature, but in every other respect, they were twins.

Ashamed of his voyeurism, Robin watched as the couple tumbled onto the wolfskin rug before the glowing embers in the fireplace and hurriedly unfastened each other's clothes, not caring if they ripped or ruined the rich fabric. The room was black, save for the faint reddish glow from within an iron brazier, but Robin, his eyesight keen through the effects of his affliction, could see every movement, every revealed white curve of Ilona's lithe body as she straddled Vlad Dracula. He bit down on his lips to avoid making a noise. He had not realized creatures such as himself could join with women in the normal way; he'd thought that blood above flesh was the vampire's desire--that sex led to death for any vampire's partner.

Eyes riveted on the moving shapes, he found himself fantasizing about the vampire's mistress, Ilona; what would it be like to touch her satiny flesh, to kiss that sultry mouth, to run his hands through the length of her hair as he covered her body with his?

But Herne...no! Such as idea was abhorrent. And what about Marion? He could never betray his beloved with another...! But then another thought crossed his

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LOXLEY.

marca 93
ILONA

mind: *But I could never taint her either, and to touch her now...I could not, would not...this Ilona is already in thrall to the vampire's spell...*

With an effort, he tore his gaze away from the entangled bodies and slipped from his niche and hastened away down the corridor. He would find a lair somewhere nearby--the mountains were riddled with caves where he could spend the day--and travel back periodically to spy on the inhabitants of the castle, this mysterious Vlad Dracul and his mistress. Especially Ilona.

*

Robin's subsequent trips to the castle taught him many things. First, that Vlad was a prince and had once been held in great esteem by his people as a conqueror of the Turks, until his cruelty and sickness had turned them; second, that both Ilona and Vlad had a smattering of English, gleaned, no doubt, from the days when Vlad had been friends with his cousin, Prince Stephen of Moldavia, and had met statesmen from around the known worlds. Robin also learned the vampire he had seen fighting Vlad was none other than Vlad's younger brother Tomas, apparently a renegade, and even, if Ilona's words could be believed, a madman.

As the cruel winter eased into mild spring and the rivers flooded and the melting snow-caps fueled their fury, Robin visited the castle more and more often, becoming increasingly fascinated by the lovely woman who had become the paramour of the vampire Vlad Tepish. He took to watching her when she was alone, when she slept, apart from her master, in a vast canopied bed draped in venom-green silk. He knew he risked discovery, but he did not care.

On those nights, he would just peer at Ilona through the filmy hangings, mixed desires coursing through his lean body, but he was afraid to speak or to act. Indeed, he wasn't entirely certain if he *wanted* to act.

Then one night when the moonlight splashed through the window-arches, casting a magical moonglow over Ilona's chamber, a voice drifted through the curtains around the bed. The woman spoke in her native language, but the tone was sultry, the words obviously meaning, "Why are you here?"

Robin stepped from the shadows, hands out to prove he meant her no harm. "You will have to speak English; my knowledge of your tongue is only slight."

The curtains parted and Ilona glided out, hair disheveled, but no less the lovely for all that. Her eyes were huge caverns in her small, heart-shaped face; the light of the single taper on the dresser shone through the flimsy fabric of her night-shift, clearly revealing the curves that lay beneath.

Most woman would have been afraid, faced with a stranger under such circumstances, but there was supreme confidence in Ilona's face. "Let me look at you, Englishman. Come here." Her English was thickly accented but quite good.

Robin took a step forward, the shafts of moonlight shining on his face. Ilona's eyes widened and a tiny gasp escaped her lips, but she covered her discomfiture in an instant. "Well, well, well, what have we here? A doppelganger of my lord Vlad... You best flee, boy, your presence here is becoming too obvious. I have felt your eyes on me often, so I have no doubt my master will sense you, too. But then again...mayhap I noticed you only because it is natural for a woman to sense when a handsome man watches her." She cast him a seductive smile and retreated to her bed, lying cat-like on the richly embroidered coverlet.

"I do not fear your lord," said Robin hoarsely, his gaze riveted on her.

Arched eyebrows rose seductively. "No? Then you are foolish indeed, Englishman. Have you no idea what he is? Vlad Dracula, son of the Dragon, is a deathless Wamphyr, who drinks the blood of men."

Loxley uttered a short, bitter laugh. "I know exactly what he is, Lady. For I too am such a creature, made by the evil Abbess of Kirklees."

Again, a look of startlement crossed her face, to be quickly concealed with another languid smile. Something played through the dark depths of her eyes--was it cunning? Hope? "Why have you come here?" she purred. "You're a long way from home. Have you come to join my lord Vlad and others of his kind--or do you hope to

challenge him? You could easily assume his place, and none would ever know the truth, and if they suspect, who would dare say so? Only Tomas might suspect...and even he is addled and might not realize were a few years to pass."

"I came here only because I had nowhere else to go." Loxley shook his head. "I don't want to rule anyone--man or...monster."

She sat upright, studying him thoughtfully through her slanted dark eyes. "How odd you are... You've been alone a long time, haven't you?"

His voice caught in his throat. "Longer than I care to remember--or so it seems." He could scarcely believe he was admitting this to her; she was lovely, but hardly the type of woman a man would go to for emotional comfort.

"Come to me, Englishman." She beckoned him; her breasts swayed seductively under her thin shift.

"You don't even know my name!"

"And I don't much care! Does that shock you? Believe me, my pretty one, when a woman is mistress to Vlad Tepish the Impaler, she quickly learns to put aside petty morals. But if you wish to tell me--what is your name?"

"Robin. Robin of Loxley."

"Then, Robin...come here." She smoothed the rumpled covers.

Awkwardly he sat beside her on the bed. She ran her long-nailed fingers over his shoulders; he could feel their sharpened tips pricking his flesh. Desire flamed in him; to feed and to rut like a wild beast...but he couldn't, *he couldn't...*

"What is the matter?" asked Ilona, her seeking fingers dancing down his chest.

He hedged around the real source of his discomfort. "What if Vlad should discover us? Would he not be enraged?"

"Probably. But he is *always* enraged," laughed Ilona. "He is no fool, however. He knows I bed others, such as his brother, Tomas. All he asks is that I do not get with child by them; he alone has that right. And that I never come to love them."

"Get with child?" Robin frowned. "Is it possible...for the living dead?"

Again, her high, tinkling laugh sounded. "Haven't you figured it yet, Robin? I am mortal flesh, no more. Vlad chose me, Ilona Bathory, to be his mortal paramour because of my...excellent family connections. I am not to be turned until...I produce a child, an heir. Unfortunately, this has not occurred yet, but it is said a vampire's seed does not often take hold."

She looped her arm around Loxley's neck, kissing his throat on the point where Abbess Sybel's fangs had entered. "You want too much knowledge, Robin of Loxley. It is often better not to know."

"Ilona, I..."

"Enough words." With a fluid movement, she coiled around him, pressing against his back. "Can you not understand? I want you and will have you, and if my lord objects he will whip me...but it is not the first time and won't be the last. I do not mind...I have learned not to mind." Releasing him she turned her back to Robin, and through her diaphanous night gown, he could see the faint marks of a recent beating. "At least he never damages the flesh," remarked Ilona, almost disinterestedly.

Robin's stomach churned. "He must be sick. How could he do such a thing..."

"You're such a sweet innocent," she told him, a wistful look filling her eyes as she caressed his jawline. "What must you have been like before you were turned?"

"Ilona..." He gripped her shoulders tightly, keeping his gaze averted from her body. "You must let me leave. It's not that I'm not...tempted. It's not..even that I fear Vlad Tepish. It's Marion. Marion..." His voice cracked.

"Marion is...was your lover?" Ilona sounded only faintly interested.

"My wife. Back in England."

Ilona frowned and suddenly grabbed Robin's face between her hands, staring deep into the pits of his dark green eyes. "Robin, although you speak like a

wamphyr newly made, your eyes are old. What year do you think it is?"

"It was...1199 when I was made...an...an abomination. It couldn't be more than a year or two later?" The last sentence became a hopeful question, as a nameless dread filled the outlaw's heart.

"Oh, Robin." She shook her head. "You poor innocent fool. Nearly 300 years have passed since then. Your Marion is nothing more than cold bones in a forgotten grave."

Robin tore away from Ilona with a strangled cry. "It cannot be! It cannot!"

"Many things I may be...a liar isn't one of them," said Ilona, her voice suddenly heavy with genuine sadness. "Don't grieve...I can make you happy."

Anger flared in him, and for an instant his eyes blackened, and his fangs grew. "You can offer me only what I could get from any whore!" he snarled, and then, uttering a sound like a strangled sob, he fled her chamber and the castle.

*

After his encounter with Ilona, Robin was tempted to leave those desolate regions, but as summer came and went, bringing no joy, and fall approaching, he found himself still within sight of Vlad Tepish's gaunt eyerie. He did not know, or did not want to admit what kept him there, or what made him stray one oddly balmy night through the black woods at the foot of castle hill.

Gazing with heightened vision, he peered between the boles of the trees and saw fires blazing in distant hillsides--the villages where the name Dracula was hated and feared. Mocking winds carried the sound of music and revelry to his ears--sounds he had been too long denied.

And that's when he realized this eve was Lammas, the harvest festival. He had no idea what the natives of this strange land called the ancient celebration, but as in England, they gave thanks for the year's bounty, for the fecundity of the earth. In their fields they would pay homage to the miracle of life in all the ways known to man; and in nine months the villages would resound to cries that were an affirmation of life...

And he was caught in a living death.

Throwing back his head, he howled at the finger-nail paring of moon hanging amid the sad, dripping branches above. To his surprise, he was answered in kind, by the chorus of ghostly lupine voices. Glancing over his shoulder, he spied a large silver-pale wolf regarding him with amber eyes; the beast seemed neither afraid nor aggressive.

"Brother wolfshead," murmured Robin, and he held out his hand to the wolf. The great silver beast slunk towards him, sniffing at his fingers, breath burning against his open palm. Loxley crouched closer to the pointed muzzle, staring directly into the feral amber eyes...and felt his body changing, his humanity slipping away on a dark and frightening tide.

He uttered a scream that was half a howl as he assumed the shape of a black-coated wolf, and in a panic, he dashed off through the shadowy woodland, the other wolf loping at his heels.

*

Robin's senses reeled as he careered madly through the forest. Strange thoughts, caught between those of a man and those of an animal, tumbled through his mind. He knew his name, remembered what had befallen him--but he was also possessed by the primal urge to make a kill, an urge that had been too long denied. Throwing back his head, he howled again...but abruptly allowed the cry to die as, through the changed perspective of his vision, he spied flames leaping between the low-hanging branches of the trees.

His wolfish companion, who was not a changeling, turned and stared in puzzlement as Robin dropped to a crouch, slinking on his belly towards the flickering light. He would not dare to go near a habitation of humans. Uttering a

low warning growl, he scampered into the brush, hoping the black wolf would follow.

Instead Loxley continued to slink towards the firelight, drawn by the promise of humans...of human flesh and blood. Normally he would have fled when consumed by such urges, but in this unwanted wolf-shape, his self-control had vanished utterly.

Now he could hear human voices, raised in some strong emotion. The sound excited him; his jaws salivated and his eyes glowed an unearthly crimson. Reaching the edge of the foliage, he stared out towards a cluster of huts, garlanded with shriveled produce from the recent harvest. A huge bonfire burned on a plot of cleared soil; women in checkered scarves, their fat braids twined with late summer flowers, clustered around flames. However, the expected scene of unbridled revelry did not exist. The women huddled together wearing expressions of mingled fear and outrage. Their menfolk stood beside them, hands clenched into fists, clutching pitchforks and other farmer's weapons.

For a moment Loxley was mystified--and then he saw the reason for their grim faces. Riding into the village from the other side of the clearing was the Lady Ilona Bathory. Her hair streamed out on the night air; her lips shone scarlet, as if freshly smeared with blood. A cloak of rich, ripe, plum-purple swirled from her shoulders, revealing a crimson gown embroidered with a little golden serpent on bodice and hem. She rode over to the nearest village woman and ordered in a high, imperious voice, "Get me a drink, peasant. I am thirsty."

"Why should we give you anything of ours?" snarled the village headman, brandishing a pitchfork in her direction. "You, who rut with that demon in the black castle Dracula!"

Her eyes ignited, and her full lips curled in a contemptuous sneer. "Insolent bastard! Lord Vlad saved you scum from the Turks. Have you forgotten that?"

"No. We are grateful to the lord Vlad who was," said the headman, still holding up the pitchfork threateningly. "But Prince Dracula is no longer the same man who, though stern and often cruel, tempered that sternness with justice. He came back from captivity amongst the infidel...changed. He began to kill us because he wanted...blood, not because we had offended his laws.".

A grieved expression crossed Ilona's features, but she cloaked it quickly with an arrogant mask. "What are the lives of a few of your whey-faced virgins for the protection offered by Vlad Tepish?"

"Protection!" screamed the man, his cheeks colouring. "He lets us starve! He is not the ruler we knew. He is only a wamphyr...a monster. Now begone, let us have our feast in peace!"

"I demand to join the celebration tonight!" said Ilona, dismounting her horse and confronting the headman, unmindful of the points of his pitchfork leveled at her heart. "It is my wish and my desire!"

Watching from beyond the firelight, Robin could see her face twist with emotion. Want. Need. Isolation. Desperation. For the first time he realized the seemingly confident mistress of Dracula was desperately lonely. Whether she had gone to Vlad's bed of free choice or not, she was still human and craved the company of her own kind, even if, damaged by years of enduring Vlad's perversions, she could no longer show her feelings in normal fashion.

"Get out of here, witch!" the headman ordered again, his voice harsh. "The presence of such a foul whore would pox the harvest!"

"Aye," screeched one of the women, visage contorted into an enraged demon-mask. "And babes'll die in the womb or be born blighted!"

"Kill the bitch!" screamed someone else. "Kill her, or she'll send her black master down upon us!"

"Devil's harlot!"

"Slut!"

"Monster!"

"Demon!"

The barbed words flew, and then so did the missiles. First a clump of cow dung that spattered all over Ilona's dress, and then a large, jagged stone. The

Mac Tire,
Mac Dowée.

stone caught the dark-haired woman in the temple, drawing blood and sending her reeling backwards. As she stumbled, she tripped in her skirt and half fell to the ground, her hand pressed to her bleeding head.

The villagers shrieked in unholy joy. "Get her now, get her before she can summon her demon-friends!"

Several of the women attacked the fallen Ilona, pulling and ripping at her unbound hair. She swatted ineffectually at them as they pinched and yanked and hurled curses at her. Then the men crowded in, their expressions turned ugly, carnal. In their secret hearts many of them envied Vlad Tepish as much as feared him, with his string of young beauties and his ability to do with them as he would. Now they had the opportunity to do what *they* would with something previously taboo, a possession of their enemy, Vlad Tepish. In that instant Ilona Bathory represented all the daughters who had vanished on the woods, whose bloodless bodies had been found like plucked lilies on the slopes below castle Dracula.

"Stake the whore!" someone shouted, and a sharp oak spear, evidently kept in readiness for such an occasion, was passed through the heaving crowd. Then men set on the struggling, feisty Ilona, dragging her to her feet and tearing her fine gown open to the waist.

"Get your hands off me!" she cried angrily, as one of the village youths groped at her exposed flesh with eager fingers.

The youth slapped her across the face while his free hand continued to grope viciously. "You like it really," he snarled. "I can tell. Your kind would bed a poxy leper!"

She spat in his eye, and kicked him in the groin. Shrieking in pain, he tumbled to the ground. "Bitch! May you meet your death in agony!"

"May your manhood wither, you bastard!" she flung at him, even as the others pulled her away from their fellow. "May it bring neither pain nor pleasure to you or any of your bitches!"

"She's cursing me!" the youth wailed. "Shut her up, or I'm doomed! Where's the stake?"

The villagers rallied, grabbing Ilona's arms even more firmly and forcing them behind her back. One of them aimed the stake and began a headlong rush towards her, screaming a prayer as he did so. Ilona's eyes widened and a scream of her own shattered the night, as she realized her death was truly imminent.

And Robin sprang.

The stake clattered to the ground as the wolf's body landed square on the villager's chest. The man tumbled, Robin tearing at his throat. Screams became gurgles as blood fountained through the air. Women started wailing; releasing Ilona, they fled for the safety of their homes, pushing wan, runny-nosed children before them.

Growling, Robin dropped his victim and rounded on the handful of ragged, unnerved villagers who still remained around the fire.

"Look at his eyes!" yelled one. "That's not a normal wolf. It must be the Lord Dracula himself, come to save his concubine!"

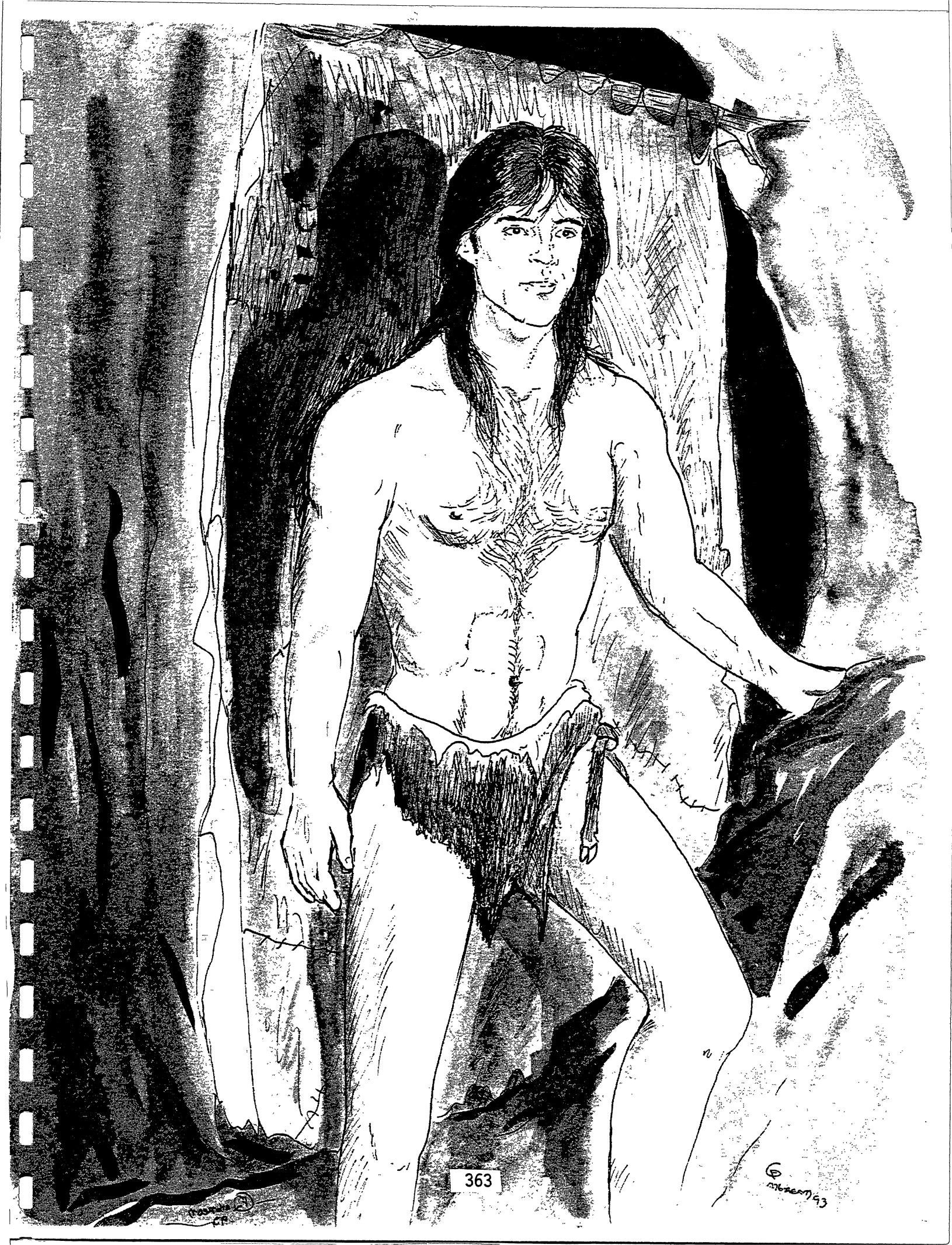
Robin shook his massive head, sending droplets of warm blood spraying amongst the villagers. Terrified even further by the promise of another attack, they panicked and fled, some of them even rushing through the bonfire in their haste to get beyond the deadly jaws.

Once they had gone Loxley approached Ilona, lying in a heap, her breathing coming in great shudders. "By the gods..." she gasped. "Vlad, I never knew you were so close by...Oh, forgive me for coming here...I was weak, so very weak..."

She reached out to throw her arms around the furred neck and suddenly Robin found the world about him spinning, slipping, changing again. Dizzy, he shut his eyes--and when he opened them, he was a man again, lying naked and cold against Ilona's silken skin.

"You!" she stared in amazement, pulling back a fraction when she saw it was not her lover. "It's you. Loxley!"

"I couldn't let you be killed... It's your master they have a score to settle



with, not you."

"I thought you believed I was everything they called me. A whore. A worthless slut."

His green eyes locked with her dark ones. "I don't know what I believe any more, Ilona. But come...let's get out of here before they return...with another stake, or with fire."

Unsteadily they climbed to their feet. Ilona stumbled and clutched at Robin's arm, her face growing pale as curds. "I feel so ill...they hit me with a stone..." She touched her bloody forehead.

"I saw. Don't worry; I won't leave you behind." He scooped her up into his arms and hastened into the forest with her clinging to his neck.

*

Loxley bore the injured woman to one of the many little caves where he sheltered during the daylight hours. Inside, he had hung up a deerskin rug to protect form drafts, and made a little bed from river rushes plaited into a mattress. It was on this humble cot he placed Ilona and then, to add to the warmth, he kindled a small fire on a hearth of stones.

Sprawled on the rushes, Ilona watched him as he girded a small deerskin around his hips to provide some decency. "You don't have to, you know," she said.

Ignoring her, he knelt on the floor to wipe away the blood congealed on her temple and then rubbed some cooling moss on the abrasion. "You've had a nasty experience; you should sleep."

"I don't want to sleep." She threw him a seductive glance from beneath lower lashes. "Sleep is too much like death."

"You amaze me. There is more in this world than..."

"Yes, maybe!" Her tone became taut with mixed anguish and anger. "But not for women like me. My beauty and my body are all I've ever had to bargain with. I'm not free...not even as much as those fat village cows you saw tonight. I am Vlad's plaything and his brood mare...why do you hate me for wanting the only joy I am free to take? Why should I not have the freedom to bestow my love where I will?"

"Love? Your desires, you mean."

Her voice suddenly broke and she looked down at her clenched hands. "I've never stopped thinking about you since that night you came to my chamber. So like him, and yet so unlike him...so gentle and innocent in comparison. Oh Robin, you have done something to me...here..." She grasped his hand desperately, pressing it over her beating heart. "This is where my pain lies now...not in the scratches those peasant fools gave me."

Her huge eyes were pleading, gazing up into his face. He stared back at her, and something inside him cracked. Marion was dead, long dead, and this girl, this twisted, abused woman, professed to love him. Love *him*. He had not thought anyone would ever love him again. He didn't love her in return, but she fascinated him, even as she sometimes repelled him, and even now he could feel his body responding to her close proximity.

With a groan, he let his hands slide down to cup her pliant breasts, stroking their dusky tips, feeling her immediate response to his ministrations. She laughed huskily, and leaned to kiss his parted lips, her tongue invading his mouth, dancing against his teeth. "You won't be sorry, Robin, you won't be sorry," she murmured in his ear, as she broke the kiss and let her nails trail through the hair on his chest to reach the ties of the deerskin he had just donned. "Say you won't be sorry..."

"I won't," he said, as he covered her on the bed, and she flung her legs around his back, pulling his hips tightly against hers. "Not again. Not ever."

Ilona laughed, and drew him even closer, hair and breath intermingling. On the damp walls, shadows converged as two figures became as one.

*

"I must go back to him!" Wild eyed, Ilona faced Robin the next morning. "There is no choice!"

Robin grabbed her shoulders, as pale and disheveled in her torn and soiled gown, she fought to get away from him. "No choice. What then were all your words of love last night? Lies? Is that what they were--lies?"

"No!" she spat at him, and for the first time he saw tears welling from her eyes. "But if I don't return to the castle, Vlad will come searching for me...and he'll kill you. Maybe kill both of us!"

"Let me come with you...I'll face him, convince him to let you go."

A manic laugh tore from deep within her throat and she shook her head wildly, sending tendrils of hair whipping across her cheeks. "I'm his possession, you idiot--he won't let me go! Even if he tired of me. And you wouldn't last a moment against him. You don't know his tricks...or bear his cruelty in your heart."

"I was a warrior, Ilona," he said harshly, a muscle twitching in his jaw. "I fought for my people, and I've killed many men, although I have no love for killing..."

"And that's why Vlad would vanquish you," she gasped, pulling free of his grasp. "For he loves killing as much as others love life! Stay away from me, Robin, if you want to continue existing; at first I wanted you for a mere night, but now I find I want you for as long as I can...*and it cannot be!*"

Dragging up her ragged skirt, she stifled a sob and fled from the cavern into the trees, leaving Robin staring after her in shock and dismay.

She couldn't go. Couldn't leave him. She wasn't Marion, but she understood his affliction and she'd said she loved him. With her he wouldn't be alone...

Alone.

The ache rose up inside him, throbbing some place below his breastbone.

Alone. He couldn't bear to face such loneliness. He would free Ilona from Vlad Tepish, even if the more powerful vampire slew him in the process.

If Robin met true death, at least he would never know such awful loneliness again.

*

Ilona sat before her dressing table, fiddling with a strand of pearls she was attempting to bind into her tresses. Her fingers trembled, and all she did went amiss. With an angry cry, she ripped the strand apart, scattering the beads across the flagstone. Leaning close to view her reflection, she grimaced in revulsion. Red from weeping, her eyes were also underscored with black shadows, while her mouth was still swollen from the force of Robin's impassioned kisses...Would Vlad notice? Oh god, he must not...

Hastily, she daubed crimson paint on her mouth, and then applied powder to suspicious looking marks on her throat.

At that moment the chamber door banged open and Vlad Tepish swept in, his dark hair a banner behind him, his eyes flashing icy arrogance. On his arm was one of his latest "toys", a winsome lass from a local village, her golden hair spilling to her waist.

Poor stupid creature, though Ilona, feeling uncharacteristic sympathy for one of those unfortunates whose drained bodies ended up littering the slopes of the castle. *It might be a mercy to kill her now...*

"Ilona, where have you been?" Vlad's rich but sinister voice rolled out across the room. "I have been looking for you. Marushka and I were eager for a little...sport."

"I went out...for a ride," Ilona mumbled, toying with her hair, hoping she appeared presentable. Vlad liked his women perfect...no slatterns with mussed tresses or unclean bodies.

"And rode all night. How unlike you." Vlad's dark brows rose questioningly.

His voice was pleasant, but she recognized the undertones. A vision of subterranean dungeons with their racks and whips and pincers rose into her mind, making her choke.

"I was...attacked by those fools of peasants," said Ilona dully. "I tried to join their celebration and they refused me."

Vlad released Marushka's supple waist and strode to tower over Ilona, his long fingers resting on her shoulders. "And that's *all* that happened last night? You didn't meet some sweet lover, someone you perhaps prefer to your rightful master?"

"Don't be silly," she said, trying to smile coquettishly at the vampire-lord. "You know there's been no one since Tomas--and that was a deed done with your knowledge, and maybe even...your approval." *Yes, you liked to torment Tomas, didn't you--making him insane with jealousy! Everything he wanted was in fact yours, and you threw him only crumbs till it broke him...*

"Mmmm." Vlad's fingers trailed down her low decolletage. "Then I suppose it was the rough handling of the villagers that made these marks on your skin, my darling?"

"Yes, yes, it was," she said, a little too hastily. "Vlad, they thought I was a vampire and tried to stake me!"

Vlad fixed her with a serpentine gaze. "Perhaps they did. I wouldn't put it past them. But...dear Marushka tells me another story...a story of something she saw in the woods last night."

"She's a liar!" said Ilona harshly, sweat breaking out on her brow. "She just wants to raise her esteem with you by discrediting me."

Vlad beckoned to Marushka, who stood, arms folded, affecting a superior expression. "Tell us what you saw, Marushka."

Marushka smiled smugly. "As I came hither to the castle on my lord Vlad's summons, I happened on a strange sight. A naked man ran through the bushes...and in his arms, he carried Lord Vlad's own lady, Ilona Bathory, her paps exposed like any harlot's! At first I thought the man might be my lord himself, for his hair and height were the same, but when he spoke, his accent was different. He took Lady Ilona into a cave..." She paused, savouring the pallor that descended on Ilona's face.

"Go on," ordered Vlad.

"Naturally I was the tiniest bit curious, so I went to look... The man placed the Lady Bathory on his bed, they talked a while...and then they joined in a frenzy of love-making. All the while, Lady Ilona professed her love for the man, and told him how much kinder and gentler he was than my lord Vlad, how he didn't hurt her or degrade her when he bedded her."

"You are lying!" Ilona cried, in desperation. "Tell him you made the whole thing up, you bitch!"

Vlad caught Ilona's chin and forced her to look up at him. His eyes had become devouring midnight caverns. "You forget, Ilona, when Marushka is under my control, she cannot lie. She speaks the truth. You have taken a lover whom you love. You have broken my rules. My all important rules, Ilona."

"My lord forgive me, I was mad, I was lonely..." she babbled, falling to her knees on the floor and flinging her arms around his booted legs. "What I told him wasn't true. No man could be a better lover than you..."

"Come." He dragged her to her feet by one arm. "You must be punished. I won't kill you this time, since up till now you have obeyed all my wishes. But this is the last time I'll be lenient."

"What do you plan?" Her pulse throbbed.

"Just punishment for a faithless woman. Don't worry, I shall make sure your beauty isn't marred. You know I am always careful."

Grabbing her in an iron grip, he propelled her through the unlit castle corridors and down a narrow staircase into the bowels of the stronghold. There, hundreds of feet into the mountainside, he had his private dungeon and torture chamber, carved out of living rock.

Vlad
Tepish
93
MARCO

He pushed her through the archway into a room that reeked of rotting flesh and other noisome essences. A fire burned in a brazier; shadows of instruments of torture stretched black and threateningly across the walls. The torturer, a madman employed by Vlad to find him victims when he was too lazy to hunt himself, lounged against the wall, grinning through his mask. Ilona hated the torturer with a passion; fat, bald, and reeking of the dead meat he handled, he was always there, watching her with his avaricious eyes. She suspected what he did with the dead before he dumped them; even though she was jaded from years with Vlad, she was repulsed and nauseated.

Vlad led her over to a pair of manacles and chained her up, face against the wall. Unhooking her dress, he exposed her back, then brought out one of his many whips--the usual one which hurt but had no real bite, as a true cat o' nine could have flayed the flesh from her bones. Ilona shut her eyes, knowing the punishment would soon be over. Vlad would forgive her, take her back...and she'd endeavor to forget Robin...

The beating stopped. She could feel Vlad's warm breath on the back of her neck. "Now, my dear, comes the other part of your punishment. To make you appreciate your lord Vlad's caresses all the more, I will give you for the night to Olav, my torturer."

"What?" Her voice emerged a high-pitched squawk. "You cannot be serious! That *pervert...!*"

Olav laughed and walked over to stand beside Vlad. Ilona could inhale the stench of him...dirt, urine, sweat, corpse flesh. "You will be a sweet morsel for me," he said, running a chunky hand over her buttocks. "It is not often I get a live one."

"Don't hurt her," Vlad said. "I still want her...I shall watch to see that you do not damage her looks."

"Oh Vlad...no!" gasped Ilona. "Not that animal...that savage... He repulses me!"

"I know," smirked Vlad.

Olav's leather breeches tumbled to the floor.

"YOU BASTARD!" A sudden cry made both men whirl in surprise. In the archway of the door stood Robin of Loxley, a drawn bow in his hand. His eyes were coal-black and his mouth fanged. "Let her go..."

Vlad looked his rival up and down slowly. "So *you* are Ilona's lover. Amazing. You resemble me to a frightening degree...only more primitive, of course. Well, there can only be one Vlad Tepish in this world; prepare to meet your end."

As Vlad took a purposeful stride in Loxley's direction, the outlaw fired his arrow. The impetus of the blow flung Vlad against the dungeon wall, but only stopped him for an instant--almost immediately he clambered to his feet, snarling, plucking the arrow from his chest. "You should know that such a child's toy would not harm me!" he growled in a guttural voice, snapping the arrow shaft in two.

Robin did not answer the lord, but instead lunged for him, smashing his bunched fist into the other vampire's chin. Vlad snarled, his fangs growing long and deadly, and he ripped at Robin's neck. Loxley whipped his head back instantly, but Vlad caught the edge of his flesh and tore, leaving bloody streaks.

Loxley snarled and bit back, catching Vlad on the shoulder. All the rage he felt at what he had become, at the monstrosity before him who was too close to himself burst up like a fountain of molten lava, and his fangs crunched deep into sinew and bone. He worried the other vampire like a terrier worries a rat, while Vlad Tepish's screams of pain and outrage reverberated around the chamber.

"Get off me, you scum! How dare you assault me in my own stronghold! Olav, take him, stake him!"

The beefy torturer flung his bulk at Loxley, trying to pry him off his master. Robin whirled, burning with vampiric rage, and bit into the fleshy throat below the mask. Olav screamed like a stuck pig and collapsed against Loxley, blood arcing in a bright geyser as the vampire drank his fill, drawing strength from the torturer's miserable life.

Freed of Robin's fangs, Vlad slunk to one side, and with a lightning movement, drew the curved blade that hung at his belt. With a fierce cry, he swung the weapon at Loxley's head, seeking to strike it from his shoulders.

Robin knew well the sound of steel carving air; such a second sense had saved his life many times in Sherwood. Flinging Olav's corpulent body to the ground, he ducked and Vlad's blade whistled harmlessly over his head.

"You're a bit out of practice, Lord Vlad!" he said mockingly, goading the other vampire.

Infuriated beyond reason, Vlad rushed him again, sword raised two-handed over his head. Robin dived forward at the same time, throwing his full weight against his look-alike's taut stomach. Vlad was hurled against the wall, his sword flying from his fist.

Both vampires leaped for the weapon, a tangle of limbs and teeth and hair as they fought for the mastery of it.

"Ilona, you bitch. Kick me the sword!" howled Vlad, his face contorted with anger as he strove against Loxley's restraining hands to grab the sword, which lay near Ilona's feet. "Hurry, or it'll go ill for you..."

Ilona's foot shot out, kicking the weapon and sending it spinning across the flagstones.

Towards Robin of Loxley.

Instantly Robin took the advantage and snatched up the weapon, at the same time rising and driving his knee into Vlad's breastbone. Vlad tumbled backwards, and Robin, with the swordsman's skills he had learned while wielding Albion, swung his blade at Lord Dracul's neck.

A terrible scream rang through the castle, and the disembodied head of the Impaler rolled across the flagstones. Ilona cried out and shut her eyes against the sight.

But Robin wasn't finished. First, kneeling by the body, he took up one of his arrows and drove it into Vlad's heart, pushing the wooden shaft straight through the ribcage. Then he took the head and threw it into the brazier. Flinging more coals on top of it, he watched, sickened, as the grisly relic burned. Meanwhile, the rest of the body, sprawled like some obscene doll on the filthy dungeon floor, disintegrated into a heap of rancid ash punctuated by charred bones.

"I can't believe it," Ilona cried, pulling on her chains. "He's dead, truly dead." Tears burst from her eyes and coursed down her cheeks.

Robin quickly unfastened her manacles, and she collapsed into his arms, shuddering and heaving with shock. He carried her sobbing upstairs to her chamber and placed her on the bed. Lying beside her, he held her, just held her, for the rest of the night, until she fell into an uneasy sleep, and it was time for him to slip into the castle crypts to shelter from the day.

*

"Robin, hold still..." Ilona's delighted shriek rang through the castle hall as she trailed a brush through Loxley's hair, which now lay in glistening tendrils down his back.

"I can't stay still," said Robin, rising and pacing. He was wearing Vlad Tepish's garments--the soft doublets and flowing shirts and clinging hose, and looked every inch the vampire-lord. "I am worried about you; so much responsibility now..."

"Worried about me? What rubbish! I shall be fine." She rose to lay hold of his arm and to give him a reassuring smile. Freed of Dracula's baneful influence, Ilona had changed over the past year. Still sensual, the seductive dresses and paint were gone, replaced by a more natural, healthy charm.

"Do you really think so? The villagers still bear ill will towards Dracula--and who can blame them?"

"I will be careful. I will only steal the livestock you are to use from the aged and infirm."

"No, you mustn't do that. It wouldn't be right. I will do the hunting from now onwards. You should stay in and rest, anyway..."

"Rest, rest, rest." she shook her dark head. "You men are all alike...nearly." She paused, remembering. "After all, it is a natural thing for a woman to bear a child."

Robin stared at her with and inscrutable expression. A child. He could hardly believe it, when, four months after he had slain Vlad Tepish, Ilona had announced that she was carrying his child. In all the time he had spent with Marion, she had never quickened...and yet Ilona had conceived with such ease. It seemed a cruel jest...for what could be born of a man who drank blood, who had lived far beyond his allotted span? He feared what the child might be like, even though Ilona assured him that the chances were fairly good that their child would be mortal, not a halfling.

"This matter worries me anyway, Ilona. You need a reputable midwife when the time comes." Reaching over, he placed his hand on her swollen belly, feeling the babe kick strongly beneath his touch. *What is it that rails there--child or monster waiting to be freed...?* "I don't trust those old harridans in the village; I know well how they feel about the inhabitants of Castle Dracula."

Ilona grasped Robin's hand and pressed it to her lips. "They won't harm me; fear of Dracula will prevent them. Now, stop fretting."

Robin drew her closer against his chest, savouring her warmth. Ilona was a comfort, if not a true love. He peered over her shoulder at the high, arched window, lightening with impending dawn. "it is time for me to seek my bed, my darling. Will you join me?"

Standing on her tip-toes, she stretched up and kissed his high forehead. "Not today. I feel restless. The babe is active..." She suddenly pulled away and grimaced, hands pressed to the small of her back.

Robin gazed at her in concern. "You are well, Ilona?"

"Yes, of course I am. Just uncomfortable. You men don't know how fortunate you are not to suffer such miseries. Now run along with you...the sky's getting light and I would not want to see the father of my child burned to ash before my eyes."

"Come with me. See me to my rest."

Together they fared down into the crypts of the castle. There, on a marble slab, Robin had set up a box in which he could recline during the daylight hours. Ilona had upholstered it in satin pillows and velvet sheets, so that it would not resemble a coffin so much as a narrow bed.

Loxley climbed gracefully into the box and lay down, hands folded on his breast. Ilona leaned over to kiss his lips, her hair flowing waterfalls of fragrant darkness over his chest, his face, his eyes. "Sleep well, my lord Robin," she whispered in his ear, and then she was gone, and the sleep of the undead overtook him.

*

Robin woke with a feeling of dread knotting his innards. He sprang from his resting place, sending coverlets and quilts flying. Eyes wild, he rushed up the narrow spiral staircase that led from the crypt. Somewhere in the deepest recesses of his mind warning bells were jangling frantically.

As he reached the top of the stairs, he heard a scream, a long-drawn out sound of agony. "Ilona!" he shouted, and charged towards the hideous noise.

Reaching his lady's bedchamber, he found the door bolted from within. A roar ripped from his throat and his eyes blackened, as he took a rush at the door, slamming his shoulder with unnatural force against the stout oak. The wood cracked; the door burst inward in a shower of splinters.

Fangs bared, Robin rushed into Ilona's chamber. The dark woman lay on the bed, pale and limp as a plucked flower. She moved her head slightly as Robin strode towards the bed, but seemed incapable of further movement. All the covers

beneath her were soaked with blood.

Next to her, face contorted in a scowl, was a hideous old crone in a filthy grey shawl. She held a dripping knife in one hand, and in the other a naked infant, still smeared with the birth blood. "Don't come any closer," she warned Robin, "or I'll kill the brat here and now!"

"Ilona!" Robin threw his lover a despairing glance.

Ilona tried to raise herself on her elbows. Now he could see that all the blood was not from the birth; a wound in her side pumped deep, arterial blood. "Get the child..." she gasped. "I am done for..."

The old crone made a harsh exhalation. "You've got all you deserved, demon's whore! But you mustn't die yet! It's my intention to see your whelp slaughtered before your eyes, as we have watched so many of out daughters die."

"No!" shrieked Ilona, although her voice was already fading. "It wasn't Robin...it was Vlad..."

"Give the child to me!" Drawing himself to his full height, Loxley strode towards the crone. He had never killed a woman, but he was filled with such an intense surge of protectiveness towards the squalling red scrap in her grizzled claws that he knew he would commit murder to save its life.

The crone raised the knife. Drool spewed from her gumless jaws. "I won't let you take your devil spawn. We have had enough...we will end this evil."

"*I* have had enough!" Robin swung at her, hands catching her scrawny shoulders and lifting her off her feet. The crone screamed and dropped the child, which fell unharmed on the bed beside its dying mother.

Seeing the child was safe, Robin dragged the screeching crone to the door and hurled her bodily into the hallway. She rolled across the flagstone like a ragged black beetle. "Get out of here, old woman!" he ordered, his voice echoing in the vast hall like peels of thunder. "I will not be merciful with you a second time!"

Panting and gibbering, the old villager scrambled to her feet and scuttled down the hall.

Assured that she was gone, Robin ran to Ilona's side. He pressed his hand against her bubbling wound, attempting to staunch the bleeding; but blood welled between his long, graceful fingers. "It's no good..." she whispered, shaking her head. Her eyes were dimming, and her lips were a ghastly shade of blue. "Look after the child...now...,"

"I can't...not alone. I can't be alone..." He grabbed her hands, squeezing the cold fingers which had lost the strength to squeeze back.

"Then you...must leave...go far...try to establish...a new...existence. If anyone can...you can...Robin. You...can...make...the night...a beautiful place... But not here, not alone...you're right."

"What of the child? What will become of it?" Robin glanced at the squirming infant on the coverlet, its thin cries piercing the air. A man-child, small but hale, with a fuzz of dark hair and dark, deep eyes. A human child, seemingly untainted by its parentage.

"Take him to Stephen's kingdom...Moldavia," gasped Ilona, reaching blindly for the child. Robin picked it up, and placed it against her shoulder. "Prince Stephen had love...for Vlad years ago...and although...love dwindled...they are still...family. And I've heard...Stephen's own son...may not...live...to grow to manhood." She held the baby tighter, as blood frothed on her cyanotic lips.

"Don't speak," Robin said, tears standing in his eyes--tears he did not think he could shed--for surely a monster could not weep in grief? "You're taxing you strength."

"It hardly matters..." wheezed Ilona. "Not now... Soon I...shall not speak again. Come closer, Robin..."

He bent over her, his long hair brushing her face. "I want to name...my son," she croaked. "Will you let me...make the choice of names?"

"Of course," he whispered.

"Then our son...will be called...Michael," she said hoarsely. "'He...who is like the Lord.' The good Christians...will like that...won't they? Although they

do not know...of what lord I speak..." She gazed up into Loxley's candid eyes with mingled sorrow and longing, and then the light in her own eyes dimmed. A rush of air exited her lips and her whole body sagged.

"No!" cried Robin. "Ilona, no!" but only the thin wails of his infant son answered his lonely cry.

*

Midnight's darkest hour resounded to the clatter of hooves. In the royal palace of Moldavia, Prince Stephen awoke in a cold sweat. Beside him, his plump wife, Sophia Maria, rolled over sleepily, and asked him what was wrong.

"Vlad...my cousin Vlad...I dreamed of him." Stephen turned on his back, arms behind his head. "He is...coming here. In fact, he may be here already. Those hoofbeats..."

Sophia Maria shivered. She had only seen the man rumoured to be a wamphyr once, standing amidst the crowds of nobility on her wedding day. Terribly handsome he'd been, but cold, with eyes that watched her every movement like a hungry serpent. That was, of course, before he'd fallen out with Stephen and become a monstrous figure whose infamous deeds were whispered all through the Balkans and beyond. "It's just a nightmare, dear one." She tried to comfort her husband.

Prince Stephen shook his dark head. "No, yesterday in the marketplace an old gypsy woman told me to expect a 'black rider on the wind.' I am certain it is Vlad of whom she spoke."

At that moment, a knock sounded at the door of the royal bed-chamber, making both of them jump in alarm. Regaining his composure, Prince Stephen rose from his bed, draped his lean frame in a heavy nightgown, and said, "Enter."

One of the Moldavian guardsmen hurried into the room; his face was bone-white beneath his helmet. He bowed hastily, and said, "Your highness, you have a visitor."

"At this hour? Who is it?" Stephen glanced at Sophia Maria, already knowing the answer.

"I believe it is you royal cousin, Prince Vlad, your Highness," said the guard. "The one they whisper is a..."

"I know what they whisper," said Stephen testily. "I will see him." He began to draw on his boots.

"Oh, Stephen, do you think it is wise?" asked Sophia Maria, remembering Vlad's icy rapaciousness.

"I must," replied her husband. "He *is* my cousin, and we were friends once. I must at least see what he wants."

With a cloak flung around his shoulders and his sword girded at his side, Prince Stephen followed the guard through the palace to the enclosed courtyard.

Sure enough, Vlad Tepish was waiting for him, mounted on a huge black horse. The vampire wore a hooded cowl that masked most of his features, but the wide, luminous, green eyes were obviously Vlad's. In his arms, he clutched what looked to be a bundle of rags.

"Cousin Vlad, what brings us this pleasure?" said Stephen, with some sarcasm, as he gazed at the saturnine figure.

"I come on a mission of mercy." Vlad's voice was oddly muffled, somehow lacking its usual biting edge. Stephen peered closer. Could his cousin be ill--if such a thing were possible amongst the Wamphyr?

"Mercy? You, cousin Vlad? It seems unlikely."

"If you do not take this child in, he will die! He is weak already; he needs a wet-nurse."

The mounted figure guided his horse over to Stephen and thrust the ragged bundle into the Prince's arms. The Prince of Moldavia found himself staring down at a very cold and very listless infant no more than a day or two old.

"Whose child is this?" Stephen questioned, with a frown.

"Mine...and Ilona Bathory's," came the muffled reply.

"Why do you give it to me?" asked Stephen, perplexed.

"Ilona is dead; he needs a mother. He needs what I can never give him--a normal upbringing. And...and...I am leaving, Prince Stephen, leaving these lands forever. A child could not accompany me on such journeys."

Stephen was shocked. "You leave Castle Dracula behind? The land you fought for?"

"Yes, forever."

"But why?"

"I cannot stay there...alone. I must go out into the world, and make amends for all the evil my kind has wrought...make an existence of more than murder and death." His green eyes lowered to the child, and Stephen thought for a moment that maybe the figure wasn't really Vlad-- the expression was far too soft. "Take care of Michael."

"I will, my cousin," was all Stephen could mutter, as the cowled man wheeled his steed around and galloped like a whirlwind from the palace courtyard, his stallion's iron-shod hooves striking sparks from the flagstones.

Shaking his head in perplexity, the Moldavian Prince retreated to the warmth of his palace, carefully holding the child who would, if his own son perished, be the heir to his kingdom...

*

A ghostly skull-cap of fog topped the trees of the vast forest. Beyond the moving sheets of white vapour, moon and stars were pale blobs, like weary half-blind eyes. Pale as a ghost in the white garment he wore, Robin marched between the trees towards his destination, a squat low building situated across the clearing.

He sighed. Another night in his new position. It seemed the nights stretched on for eternity...well, so they did. A bitter smile touched his lips. How idealistic he's been when he had left the ancient kingdom of Wallachia. He'd learned the truth later on; that sometimes one cannot be all that one would hope, and nature dictates one's actions. Need had come upon him; he had killed, despite his best intentions. Anger, despair and physical desire had possessed him and, as other vampires, he had treated humans like cattle. Sometimes. But it was not his way, in his heart of hearts, and he fought the urges with every fiber of his being. And now, at last, he had found an acceptable manner in which he could drink blood without harming anyone. If the rest of his vampire brethren would only accept it, too...

He took another few strides, the wind blowing his long hair, bound behind him for neatness' sake, straight out from his head. In the distance a wolf howled, and a blast of lightening lit up ridged mountains. His mouth tautened into a grim line. It was going to be a wicked night, and not necessarily because of the impending storm.

Reaching the low white building, he approached the main door and pressed down on the iron bar across it. Silently the door glided open and he walked into a pristine corridor that in its turn led into a brightly lit room.

Form behind a desk, a pretty, cheerful-looking woman glanced up and flashed a smile.

"Good evening, Dr. Schreck. You're on the night shift again?"

He grinned back and handed her a blood-red rose he'd been holding in one hand. She blushed profusely. "It's *Max* to you, not Dr. Schreck, Lisa. And I *like* the night shift. All the prettiest nurses are on then."

"Well, let's hope for a quiet one, Dr. Schreck," said Lisa, blushing even more deeply while she toyed with the rose.

"Yes, let's hope so," said Robin of Loxley, outlaw, vampire, and pretender to the title of Dracula, as he walked smoothly and confidently down the hospital's gleaming white halls.

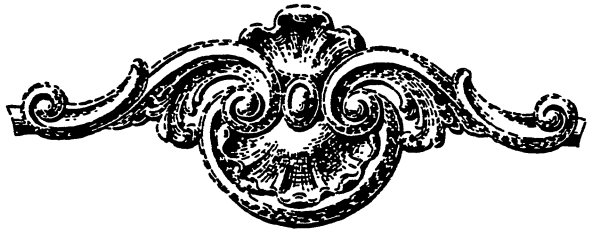
- The End -

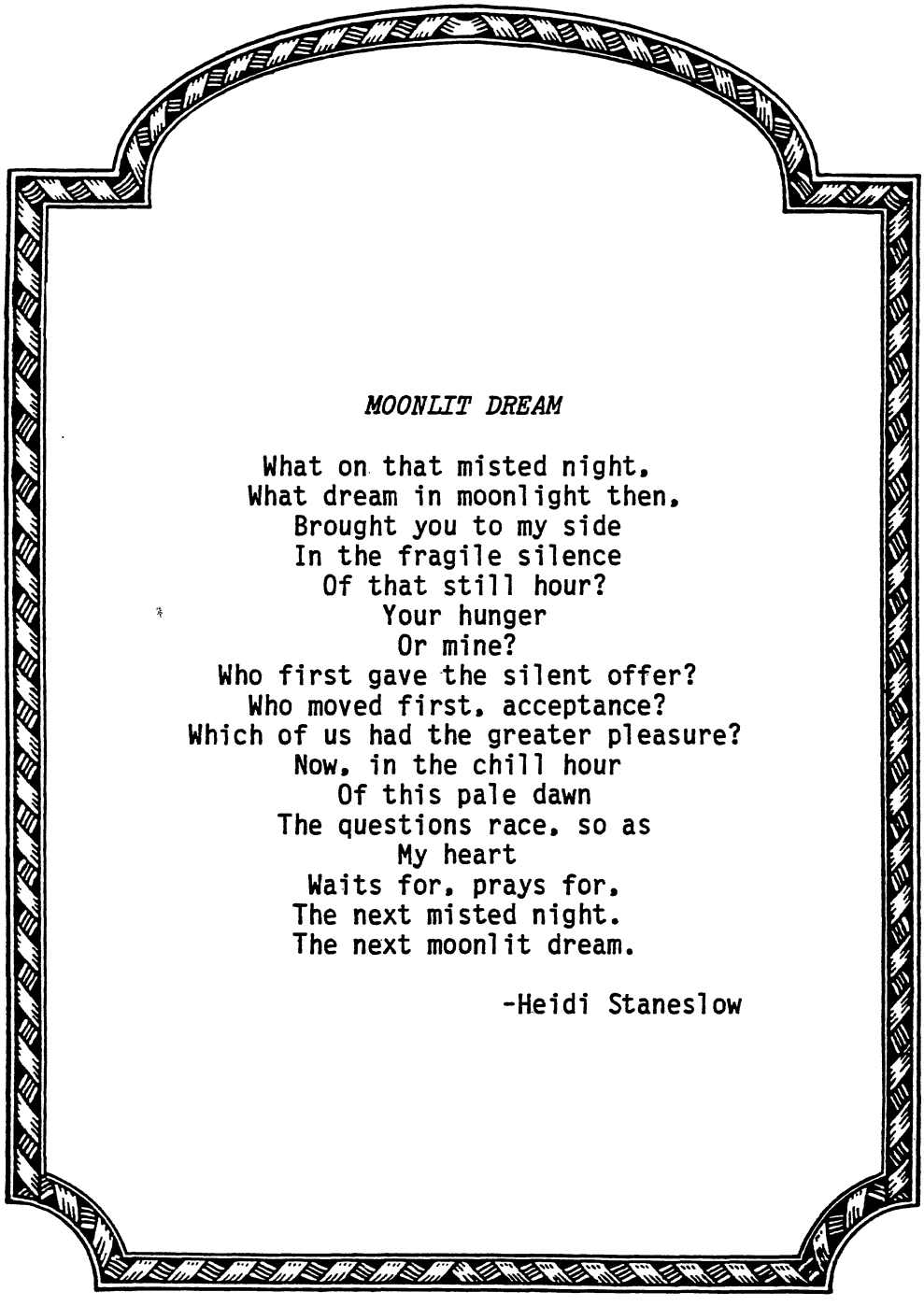
[Author's note: This story was inspired by several items. The first was an article in a UK newspaper which claimed Robin Hood was a vampire. In the traditional ballads Robin was bled to death by the Abbess of Kirklees; the proponent of the vampire theory claims this meant she drank Robin's blood and turned him into a vampire.

As I began to write my story, I also did some research on the real Dracula, Vlad Tepish. Coincidentally, he just happened to be a cousin to the Prince of Moldavia, and also had an illegitimate son whose name was Michael!

This certainly made for a lot of tie-ins, since actor Michael Praed played not only Robin Hood but good-guy vampire Max Schreck, AND Prince Michael of Moldavia (not the same one, of course...but a descendent, no doubt!)]

[Janet P. Reedman has beèn writing fantasy since she was 11 years old and discovered Tolkien. Since then she has garnered publication credits in several hundred small press/semi-pro fantasy/horror magazines. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for poetry in '86, and has won several writing awards. In '84 she stumbled onto ROBIN OF SHERWOOD, and from there found her way into the wacky world of fanfic and fanzines. Her first vampire story, "Exodus," a SON OF DARKNESS/SUBSPECIES crossover unrelated to the current tale, appeared in the first issue of GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS; a sequel to the current story is planned for GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 3. She currently edits a ROS fanzine, LEGEND. Besides writing, she also sings (sort of) and acts, and currently resides in her favorite spot to travel to, England.]





MOONLIT DREAM

What on that misted night,
What dream in moonlight then,
Brought you to my side
In the fragile silence
Of that still hour?
Your hunger
Or mine?
Who first gave the silent offer?
Who moved first, acceptance?
Which of us had the greater pleasure?
Now, in the chill hour
Of this pale dawn
The questions race, so as
My heart
Waits for, prays for,
The next misted night.
The next moonlit dream.

-Heidi Staneslow

Varina

Nick Knight of
FOREVER KNIGHT

****

LETTERS

****

I LOVED the zine! At first I bought it for the P.N. Elrod story, but I was impressed with many of the others as well!! I would recommend that some sort of index/guide to the shows/series etc. be put in future issues. Most I recognized, but some (like SON OF DARKNESS) I never heard of!

[Consider it done! -Ed.]

Great job!
I look forward to #2!

Jeanine Sorel

****

I was EXTREMELY pleased with GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS. I read the zine in four days!

I was delighted with the care and the obvious hard work put into the zine, in order to produce the wonderful product!

Here are two suggestions that you may wish to use or to ignore:

1) I noticed that some of the artwork was not signed. Is it possible to type the artist's name below the artwork? (It was helpful to include the artists names on the Table of Contents.)

2) Is it possible to include information (i.e. past credits, future projects, etc.) about the artists (similar to information included about some of the writers)? This could be contained on one page (with the artwork page numbers) toward the end of the zine.

[I think it would be distracting to type the artist's name on actual page with the artwork, but GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS will definitely have an "About the Artists" section next time. Thanks for the suggestion! -Ed.]

Jeanetta Scott

****

Dear Mary Ann,

Thanks so much for my contributor's copy of GOOD GUYS #1. I'm spending my vacation in California, visiting my folks, but made a point of taking this zine (as well as HEARTSBLOOD and most of our published NICHOLAS & VARINA stories) along on the trip. I expect to impress my parents no end!

Anyway, getting on to my LOC: excellent layout and graphics, with few typos. Fairly high quality of stories, and an interesting mix of media and original stories. "Partners in Time" was amusing, and had a nice mix of humor and drama. Sherlock's art wasn't the best choice for it, though she handled the mirror well.

"Incunabula" was interesting and well-done. I will look forward to more adventures of this pair of characters. *[Nigel and Denise appear in this issue in "First Date." -Ed.]*

Derrin's MacGyver portrait on p. 39 is the best of her work, I think. Barnabas and Nicholas are fair, Varina so-so.

B.N. Fish's stories, "instinct" and "Choices" were problematical to me. I know nothing about STARSKY AND HUTCH, I never watched it, and I barely know the dark-haired cop from the blond one. I would have appreciated either a paragraph about the show at the stories' end (as Laurie Keeper provided for STINGRAY, another

show I know little about); or a less intimate viewpoint narration in theStarsky and Hutch scenes. To tell the truth, I ended up disliking Starsky because he was filtering everything through his perception. The first story had no exposition, which was very unsettling--I thought you had run the second story first, until I got to the scene with Nick and Jack, which explained the cryptic dialog between Starsky and Hutch. Also, what does Hutch think of all this? He's the protagonist, the vampire, but his buddy's doing all the reacting!

"Moondance," "April's Dream," and "Catching Cat" were all fine original stories. "Moonshine" was a little too strange for me, but creative! "In the Beginning" was dramatic and moody. "Black Dawn" had a real eerieness to it, a and I'd like to see more. "Running" and "Partners" were good NICK KNIGHT stories. "A Curse in Time" was funny and romantic by turns. "Exodus" -- excellent, but what happened to Radu?! He's still standing on page 221, but no one pays him any further attention. Was something lost?

Pat Dunn

[Pat is the co-author of the NICHOLAS AND VARINA stories which appeared in GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 1. Look for N&V again this issue. -Ed.]

****

Dear Mary Ann,

I enjoyed GGWF1 a great deal. I liked the NICK KNIGHT stories the most. Nicholas and Varina are very inventive characters. The poetry was also very good. I am going to write in support of FOREVER KNIGHT. I love that show. It's too good to be canceled.

Take care,

Mickie Belcher

****

More DARK SHADOWS! (Ben cross version!!)

How about a sequel to "Angel of Darkness, Angel of Light"? Can't wait to see their story in the Z zine. And a NICHOLAS & VARINA crossover I'd like to see would be with REMINGTON STEELE; also could do PHANTOM OF THE OPERA, KNIGHT RIDER (I think David Hasselhoff has great vampire lips), ROBIN OF SHERWOOD -- all kinds of possibilities! (Even RAMBO! Nah...that's taking it too far...) Or, I'd love to read about how Nicholas and Varina first met.

Teresa Ward

****

As for the NICK KNIGHT controversy, over what version is better--I like them both. I do agree with you that they are totally different universes. I have been a fan of the NICK KNIGHT movie starring Rick Springfield for so long--I cherished my videotape of the movie and often longed for more episodes or stories featuring the characters. Then when FOREVER KNIGHT came along I thought--finally, here's what I've been longing for. But after getting over the initial shock of Geraint Wyn Davies playing someone I always envisioned Rick Springfield playing--I started to give it a chance. I do like the way FOREVER KNIGHT uses flashbacks to show us the stories and adventures Nick encountered in past centuries. I am glad to have a vampire series that isn't campy or stupid. FOREVER KNIGHT is pretty good (what I've seen so far).

Also a good vampire movie I rented was PALE BLOOD starring George Chakiris, Paula Ludwig, and Wings Hauser. It's kinda weird, but has some good parts in it and interesting ideas. *[Would any writers out there like to tackle a PALE BLOOD story for a future issue of GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS? -Ed.]*

Michele West

[Michele did our front cover for this issue of FANGS, plus lots of the interior art! -Ed.]

****

Dear Mary,

Sorry about the mediocre rating I gave the zine. *[She rated it a 6 on a scale of 0 to 10. -Ed.]* I really did enjoy it; however, for every story that I'd rate a 10, there was another I'd give only a 3 or 4. Also, I really hate poetry, and I'm not wild about NICK KNIGHT or SON OF DARKNESS either (although I did like "Running," "Partners," and "A Curse in Time" anyway). Additionally, there were a number of technical errors that bothered me: several omissions in the Table of Contents and art credits, and page 24/25 was missing. Like the stories, the artwork ranged from very good to poor, but I really feel the color covers were a waste of time. The pictures used would probably have looked better in black and white.

On the positive side, although there was plenty I didn't like, what I did enjoy was so good I have no regrets about buying it, and would certainly consider getting issue #2. I loved all the Nicholas and Varina stories in particular, the original story "Moonshine," and P.N. Elrod's "Partners in Time" (for which I bought the zine in the first place).

Looking forward to GGWF2,

Carol Walker

[We're trying MUCH harder to iron out those nasty technical errors this time, although only a few copies actually went out with mistakes in the Table of Contents or art credits before the problem was caught. Thanks for your comments! -Ed.]

****

Dear Mary Ann,

Thank you so much for this spectacular fanzine!! I enjoyed all the stories, some more than others, but they were all good.

I didn't mention it as one of my six favorite stories because its more of a poem but Judith R. Conly's "Seeking Dracula" was superb. I also want to thank you for so many NICHOLAS & VARINA stories--I truly love these characters. I first read about them in HEARTSBLOOD (also an excellent publication) and was very pleased to find several more of their tales in GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS. Please let me know when Issue #2 is ready. Thanx again!

Sincerely,

Angela Burton

[If anyone is interested in checking out HEARTSBLOOD, edited by Valerie Meachum, see the ad in the back of this issue. -Ed.]

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Dear Mary Ann,

Thanks for the zine. Wow, some cover--colors, yet!

I love the illustration with "Incunabula"! It looks just like Nigel. (Sometimes I try to find photos in magazines that look like my characters, to help me write descriptions, and it's really hard to find any that look just right. Yet Barb hit it right on target.) You'll see on my questionnaire that I scored the Elrod story as first. I've never seen QUANTUM LEAP; luckily our 14-year-old son is a big fan of it. And it appears my pop culture education is lacking--I've never watched STARSKY AND HUTCH and would never have expected it to be a favorite for fan fiction. Nicholas and his lady are neat characters, hope they'll be back. Barnabas Collins' "differences" are nicely finessed by pointing out that his condition is anomalous because of Angelique's curse. Back to Elrod's story, I wondered where Bobbi was. Of course, in a short story with so much rushing around involved, we wouldn't expect to see her on-stage, but I still wondered. Has she "died" and become a vampire, or is she still around as Jack's lover? I hope they haven't broken up. And I hope Elrod will eventually return to Jack and deal with the question of their long-term relationship. Elrod's Blood on the Water is an exciting novel but disappointingly inconclusive. In the GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS story, I think Sam should not have to struggle with Charles' accent. A person's voice tones and speech mannerisms are a matter of physiology (vocal cords) and learned reflexes--in the body, not the mind. (And my son who watches QL agrees with me that Sam always sounds like the person whose body he's in.) Oh, well, it makes an entertaining problem for him.

Personally, I like the new FOREVER KNIGHT better than the original pilot, mainly because the medical examiner is a woman in the series. And I enjoy seeing the glimpses of Nick's past. I hope the next GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS will contain some stories based on the series.

My objection to Vlad's appearance in TO DIE FOR is somewhat mollified by the explanation in the zine that he changes bodies when he "dies." So it makes sense that he doesn't look a bit like the historic Vlad.

Will you run a letter column in the next GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS with readers' comments on the first issue? Feel free to quote me. As for dividing the zine, please don't! I like the mix the way it is! I don't want to have to buy two zines, and seriously, to me a whole volume of nothing but media stories would get monotonous. I like the variety present in this one.

Keep up the good work.

In cool blood,

Margaret Carter

[Margaret Carter is the author of "Incunabula," which appeared in GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 1, and "First Date" and "Wild Branch," which appear in the current issue. And check the back of this publication for an ad on her zine, VAMPIRE'S CRYPT. -Ed.]

****

Dear Mary Ann,

The day I got GGWF, I sat right down and devoured it. I was especially happy to see all the NICK KNIGHT stories. I really enjoyed Barbara's stories. I always liked STARSKY AND HUTCH, so it was fun to see a crossover with STARSKY AND HUTCH and my fav vampire. I thought "In the Beginning" was well-written, but as I had gotten the distinct impression that Nick was looking for the goblet at that time because he was already a vampire and searching for the goblet as a cure, I didn't

think this was "true" to the NICK KNIGHT movie. But, so what, right, it was a good story. Anyhow, it was interesting to see someone else's interpretation. Oh, I feel dumb about my story, actually it was set in San Francisco rather than LA, and I put Perry Como in there instead of Tony Bennet (when Nick and Schanke were complaining about the elevator music). Oh well. I really enjoyed the essay on "What Makes a Vampire Good" -- I thought it was very well done.

Of the other stories, I enjoyed Sharon Wells' story, "A Curse in Time," as I'm a ROBIN OF SHERWOOD/SON OF DARKNESS fan, which means I'm a Michael Praed fan. I must admit, I didn't care too much for the crossovers with Nicholas and Varina. They were well-written, but as Nicholas and Varina were original characters, I wasn't all that interested in them. You asked in your survey (which I've included) about mixing new with established (TV or movie) characters, and I'm strongly in favor of leaving out "original" characters in GGWF2. But, hey, I'm sure I'll enjoy whatever you decide to put in! How did the convention go, by the way (lo these many months ago)? Did you sell many of GGWF? Hope so. *[Yes! Thanks for asking! -Ed.]*

Oh! Before I forget, did you notice that Rick Springfield is in JUST DESERTS, a failed pilot with Joel Grey? It's on right before HUMAN TARGET this Saturday (Aug. 15) on the same channel. Have you been watching HUMAN TARGET? I was disappointed after the first episode (not enough Rick Springfield!), but the subsequent shows have been much better. It hasn't been doing that well in the ratings, but then again, what does against the Olympics? I keep hoping that HT will get picked up as a mid-season replacement, but I doubt it will. How about FOREVER KNIGHT? I was so delighted when this went on the air, even though it wasn't Rick Springfield. It's interesting, that's about all I can say. I agree with you, it's definitely NOT the same universe as NK. I think the thing that bothers me the most is the portrayal of NK by Wyn Davies. Although Nick is supposed to desire to regain his mortality, and hate what he is, Geraint's character acts so damn smug and superior about being a vampire! Like in the episode "False Witness," when Nick and Natalie are talking at the end, and Nick "vamps" out at the end as a joke. Yech. Oh, well.

Best wishes,

Cheryl L. Connors

[Cheryl is the author of the NICK KNIGHT stories "Running," which appeared in the first issue of GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS, and "Healer," which appears in the current issue. -Ed.]

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GUIDELINES FOR:

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL (based upon "Robin of Sherwood"),
GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS, *Z: THE ZORRO ZINE*,
IMMORTAL TALES (based upon "Highlander"), and *HEAVENLY CONNECTIONS*

1. Please type and double space all manuscripts. Please be sure to include your telephone number, return address, and a SASE. Clear computer printouts or xerox copies are acceptable. Also, please note that manuscripts should be considered DISPOSABLE.

2. Be sure to NUMBER your pages! Put your name on each page.

3. Please include a diskette if at all possible. A 5 1/4 diskette compatible with IBM Wordstar or Word Perfect is preferable, but a wide variety of word processing programs for various computers on both 5 1/4 and 3 1/2 diskettes can be translated. If you have any questions in regard to this matter, please inquire. PLEASE LABEL YOUR DISKETTE!

4. We wish to work with our authors. If any editorial changes are made other than such small changes as the correction of grammatical errors or misspelled words, the author will have the opportunity to review the edited manuscript.

5. If you have a particular preference for the exact presentation or typeface of your poetry, please submit it in the same fashion as you would art work--camera ready.

6. Artwork may be done in any black and white medium. Clear xeroxes (retouched if necessary) are acceptable for pen and ink drawings. For charcoal or pencil, or any pieces using water wash, please send a screened copy that I can use as a master or, preferably, allow me to borrow the originals. Color art is accepted only under very rare circumstances; please send a color xerox for consideration rather than the original.

7. Art which does not illustrate a particular story is welcome. However, if you would like us to send you a story to illustrate, please send photocopied samples of your completed work and mention your favorite characters. Some idea of your schedule and availability, as well as how long it normally takes you to complete an assignment, would be appreciated.

8. If you have a flair for borders, filler art, or calligraphy, please let us know what interests you. Send photocopied samples of your work.

9. Fiction may be rated G to R. How this is defined is wholly at the discretion of the editor. THE ZORRO ZINE will try to stay away from R-rated material; GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS will allow a fairly hard R rating. Write and describe what you have in mind if you are unsure.

10. Payment is in contributors copies. For publications of less than 150 pages, these are given for three or more pages of art or manuscript; for publications of over 150 pages, these are given for six or more pages of manuscript, or four or more full pages of art work. A proportional discount on the price of the publication is given for less lengthy contributions.

11. For more detailed information regarding the requirements for a specific publication, please request the flyer for that publication.

12. All rights revert to the author or artist upon publication, except for THE TURN OF THE WHEEL. TURN OF THE WHEEL stories in the shared "Guy of Huntingdon" scenario may not be reprinted without the editor's (as well as the author's) permission.

13. Please send all submissions to (NAME OF PUBLICATION) Mary Ann B. McKinnon, 254 Blunk Avenue, Plymouth, Mi. 48170.

Submissions deadline for GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 3 is August 31, 1993.
(Stories accepted after that date will appear in GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS 4.)

"Good Guys Wear Fangs"

ART, POETRY, FICTION, ARTICLES,
AND LETTERZINE STYLE LETTERS SOUGHT!

Do YOU have a favorite good guy vampire?

Possibilities include "Nick Knight, "Blood Ties" (FOX's series pilot about an extended family of vampires in present day California), MICHAEL PRAED's new movie "Son of Darkness," and its prequel "To Die For," starring Brenden Hughes. "Dark Shadows" stories will also be considered, particularly if they focus on Barnabus's striving to retain his humanity, or romantic stories in which his plight actually has a happy ending. (I prefer the Ben Cross version.)

Crossover stories with your favorite series are also welcomed. For example, how would Stingray or Robin Hood handle the situarion if either of them suddenly woke to find himself a vampire? What if Starman met a vampire who was as different and special as he was himself?

Or be completely original and create all your own characters.

Almost anything goes as long as there is at least one vampire in the story striving to maintain his (or her) humanity and basically be a moral person, although I tend to personally shy away from horror and go for upbeat endings.

If you have an idea, write and send a SASE, or send a SASE for notification of availability. Stories may be rated G, PG, or R.

Particularly seeking stories based upon:

RAVEN
REMINGTON STEELE
SIMON & SIMON
KUNG FU: THE LEGEND CONTINUES
TIME TRAX
BAYWATCH
HIGHLANDER

And of course NICK KNIGHT and FOREVER KNIGHT tales are always welcome!

Please contact:

Mary Ann B. McKinnon
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, MI 48170

"Good Guys Wear Fangs"

QUANTUM LEAP
MEETS
The Vampire Files

The year is 1956. Sam Beckett has leaped into the life of Charles Escott, A Chicago detective with a most unusual partner—vampire Jack Fleming. Before the night is out, Sam must prevent Escott's murder and Fleming's sudden disappearance!

PARTNERS IN TIME, a novella by Vampire Files author P.N. Elrod, was specially written to launch the 1st issue of the fanzine GOOD GUIS WEAR FANGS. Edited by Fan-Q nominee Mary Ann McKinnon, this zine will feature original works and crossover stories from your favorite TV series. If you like a good vampire tale, this is the zine for you!

Plus

NICHOLAS & VARINA are a delightful vampire couple created by Diana Smith and Pat Dunn. He looks like Duncan Regehr of Zorro, and she looks like Marina Sirtis of Star Trek: The Next Generation. In the following stories, they meet some of our favorite television heroes:

COLUMBO can't quite believe what his eyes are telling him as he investigates a gruesome murder committed by a self-styled "vampire-killer" who is stalking Nicholas. Art by Cheryl Duval.

MACGYVER can't quite figure out what to do with the situation when he meets a beautiful lady vampire who takes him in hand and insists that she is there to help save him from Murdoc's latest diabolical plan! Art by Derrin.

Finally, Barnabas Collins of the new ***DARK SHADOWS*** has a real reason to believe that there is hope when an ancient witch as powerful as Angelique takes her on head to head! (Guest starring Liara the Irish Witch, created by Valerie Meachum) Art by Valerie Meachum and Derrin.

CATCHING CAT, by Athan Y. Chilton, is the lyrically beautiful tale of Paul Leluvo, gypsy and muscian, who must die in order to find the true nature of love and immortal life with the mysterious woman who loves him. Art by Athan Y. Chilton.

In an eerily written tale with a classic vampiric flavor, ***STINGRAY*** must face his greatest challenge when he awakens to find himself *transformed*... Don't miss BLACK DAWN, by Laurie Keeper, editor of the ***STINGRAY*** fanzines Small Favors and More Small Favors. Art by Peggy Spaulding.

INCUBABULA, by professional author Margaret Carter is a tale of a graduate student who meets again an old friend who wants her to help him steal a very rare book from the antiquities room of the university library. What secret is he hiding, and why has he always kept her at arms length? This one grabs the reader and just won't let go! Art by Barb Johnson.

INSTINCT and ***CHOICES*** are two ***NICK KNIGHT/STARSKY & HUTCH*** tales by B.N. Fish. In the first, Starsky and Hutch can't figure out just *exactly* what is so strange about Detective Nick Knight... In the second, Hutch is viciously attacked by a rogue vampire, and Nick and Starsky must help him make the most d'fficult decision of his life!

In ***EXODUS***, by award-winning Robin of Sherwood writer Janet P. Reedman, Max Schreck from ***SON OF DARKNESS*** awakens from the discarnate state in Rumania, where he is found and nursed back to health by Stefan of Castle Vladislaus, whom we first met in ***SUBSPECIES***. When Stefan and his lady are kidnapped by Stefan's evil brother Radu, Max must face the Iron Woods and the evil witch Avestitsa as he and his traveling companion seek to free his new-found friends. Art by Frances Quinn.

In ***APRIL'S DREAM***, by Jack Summers, a young vampire woman from Marsh Hollow deep in the Appalachians seeks to find some contact with human life other than the death and destruction indiscriminantly dealt out by her family. Art by T.J. Glenn.

A CURSE IN TIME is the tale of inept Vampire Hunter Martin Planting, and how the vampire always gets the girl. A ***SON OF DARKNESS/ROBIN OF SHERWOOD*** crossover by Sharon Wells. Art by Sharon Wells.

Plus ***NICK KNIGHT*** tales by Cheryl L. Connors and M.H. Burchett that put him on the job in Los Angeles, and ***IN THE BEGINNING***, a terrifying account by Lisa Savignano of ***NICK's*** -- and LaCroix's -- blood-soaked origins as vampires in the deep, impenetrable jungles of South America.

Finally, there are original vampire tales by Rachel Kadushin, Lyle MacDougall, and Diana Smith and Pat Dunn; poetry by Janet P. Reedman and Judith Conley; and an essay by Margaret Carter defining just *What is* a good guy vampire and providing an overview of the literature in the field.

Color front cover of NICK KNIGHT by Chris Haire. Color back cover of Michael Praed from SON OF DARKNESS by Barb Johnson. Approximately 250 pages.

QUANTUM LEAP © Belisarius Productions, VAMPIRE FILES © P.N. Elrod

Available at Media West Con from Bill Hupe in the orphan zine room, or from Mary Ann B. McKinnon, 254 Blunk Avenue, Plymouth, Mi. 48170, beginning in June 1992. *$22.00 postpaid*

THE GOOD GUY VAMPIRE LETTERZINE

(1) Write about your favorite literary or media "good guy" vampire.

(2) Discuss what type "good guy" vampire your favorite hero would make.

(3) Address the issue of just WHAT IS a "good guy" vampire. (Does Barnabas Collins qualify?)

(4) Talk about the differing rules of just what a vampire is and what it can do as portrayed in various media and literary sources.

(5) Discuss general vampire lore.

Issue #1 now available. Contains an article by Margaret L. Carter (reprinted from GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS) providing an overview of "good guy" vampires in literature, and a guide to Forever Knight flashbacks. Letter writers include P.N. ELROD, creator of vampire Jack Fleming and author of THE VAMPIRE FILES (ACE Science Fiction).

Now accepting letters for Issue #2: discuss the relevancy of Coppola's Dracula to "good guy" vampires, the ladies in the life of Nick Knight from CBS Late-Night's Forever Knight, or whatever else appeals to you.

Issue #1 $3.00. Four issue subscription $10.00. Average issue 30 full size pages in length, cardstock covers.

Contact: Mary Ann B. McKinnon
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

Also: GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS, Z: THE ZORRO ZINE, Z: THE ZORRO LETTERZINE/NEWSLETTER, HEAVENLY CONNECTIONS (a multi-media zine based upon upbeat contacts with the hereafter), THE TURN OF THE WHEEL (based upon "Robin of Sherwood"), IMMORTAL TALES (based upon "Highlander" the movie or the TV series). SASE for further information.

HEAVENLY CONNECTIONS

Examples from the movies and television that demonstrate mood or atmosphere of the types of stories I'm looking for:

FROM THE MOVIES:
"Heaven Can Wait"
"Chances Are"
"Heavenly Kid"
"Made in Heaven"
"Here Comes Mr. Jordan"
"Portrait of Jenny"
"The Ghost and Mrs. Muir"
"Somewhere in Time"
"Always"
"It's a Wonderful Life"
"On a Clear Day You Can See Forever"
"Topper"
"Defending Your Life"
"High Plains Drifter"
"Somewhere Tomorrow"

FROM TELEVISION:
"Highway to Heaven"
"The Ghost and Mrs. Muir"
"MacGyver" episode in which Mac leaves his body in a near-death experience; episode in which he goes back in time to the Old West in a dream, is killed in that dream, and wakes up to find the lucky pocket knife from the dream in his pocket!
"Magnum PI next-to-last season finale in which Magnum has a near-death experience and really thinks he's dead; another episode shows the return of his friend Mac who had previously died; Magnum falls in love with a girl long dead.
Selected "Moonlighting" episodes
"The Two Worlds of Jenny Logan" (TV movie available on video)
"The Hanged Man" (TV movie)
"Paradise" episode in which The Grim Reaper comes to town seeking Ethan, but it seems that a higher power may have decided that it's not quite time for him to die.
"Beauty and the Beast": Catherine has a near-death experience when she almost drowns in the trunk of her car; Catherine is visited by her father after his death.
"Wiseguy" episode in which Vinnie makes the bells ring and McPike pulls out of his coma.

As the examples show, I'm looking for upbeat stories about near-death experiences, reincarnation, friends or loved-ones who come back as helpful ghosts, guardian angels who are trying to redeem a not-quite perfect life, small miracles that punctuate everyday life, ghostly or mystical displacement in time, or love stories with a beautiful but haunting quality. No horror, but harder-edged stories (particularly western) will be considered on an individual basis.

Apply these themes to your favorite fandom, or write an entirely original story. I would particularly like to see the hero of another fandom have a near-death experience similar to MacGyver's or Magnum's (Perhaps Vinnie, Hutch, McCall, Sonny, or Vincent?). Or perhaps one of our heroes could fall in love with someone who is really a ghost or somehow displaced in time. Here, too, is a perfect opportunity if there are any "Highway to Heaven" fans out there.

Use your imagination and let me hear from you!

Also seeking stories from the short-lived USA cable series MATRIX, starring Nick Mancuso.

Contact: Mary Ann B. McKinnon
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

(All world views welcome, whether Christian, American Indian, Buddhist, Jewish, or something else entirely.

ALSO COMING OR AVAILABLE: GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS
THE GOOD GUY VAMPIRE LETTERZINE
Z: THE ZORRO ZINE
Z: THE ZORRO LETTERZINE
THE TURN OF THE WHEEL (based upon "Robin of Sherwood")

(submissions deadline November 1994)

Introducing a new zine based upon HIGHLANDER

IMMORTAL TALES!

Seeking submissions of fiction, poetry, and art for a new zine based upon either the movie or the television series.

> *I am particularly seeking longer stories with good characterization and well-developed plots, but short pieces are welcome as well. Writers are also encouraged to build stories around flashbacks, or incidents in Duncan's past that he has mentioned in the show. Finally, crossovers are welcome if they are not contrived; perhaps Duncan wound up in Paradise after almost being hung during the Civil War -- or he could meet a modern-day swordsman of a completely different ilk, such as Jonathan Raven. Use your imagination! The key is for the reader to pick up your story and not want to put it down.*

I am always happy to discuss possible story lines, so write with your ideas. Submissions deadline January 31, 1994. Stories rated G to R are welcome.

Mary Ann B. McKinnon
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

Coming or available from the same editor (SASE for more information):

GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS
THE GOOD GUY VAMPIRE LETTERZINE
TURN OF THE WHEEL (based upon "Robin of Sherwood")
HEAVENLY CONNECTIONS (media zine based upon upbeat encounters with the hereafter, such as friendly ghosts, near-death experiences, reincarnation, guardian angels, etc.)
Z: THE ZORRO ZINE
Z: THE ZORRO LETTERZINE/NEWSLETTER

Z: THE ZORRO ZINE

Coming in 1993!

Fiction, poetry, art, and articles sought for all versions of the Zorro legend, including:

Duncan Regehr

Guy Williams

Frank Langella

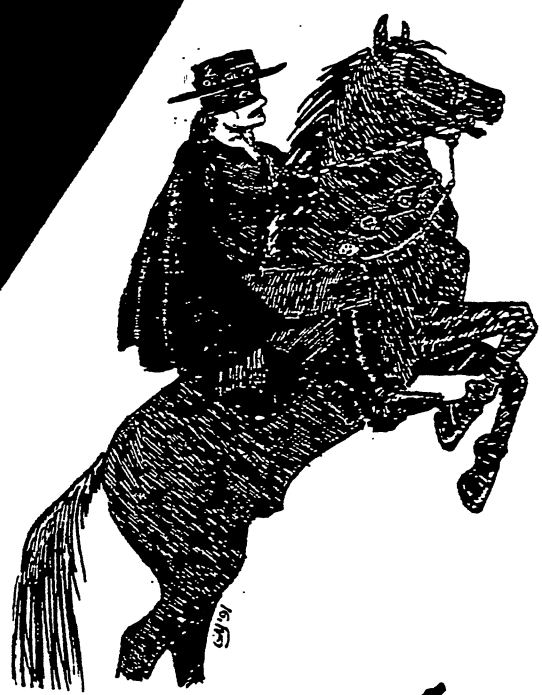
Douglas Fairbanks

Tyrone Power

Alain Delon

George Hamilton

Henry Darrow



SASE for notification of availability to:

Mary Ann McKinnon
254 Blunk Ave.
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

Z: The Zorro Letterzine/Newsletter

(Now sanctioned by Zorro Productions!)

Z: THE ZORRO LETTERZINE/NEWSLETTER is devoted to all versions of the Zorro legend. It is:

-A LETTERZINE through which all Zorro fans can have the opportunity to discuss any aspect of Zorro with others who are just as enthusiastic as they are! (Those who just like like to read letters are just as welcome as those who like to write them!)

-A NEWSLETTER to keep enthusiasts informed of any new developments in regard to media versions of Zorro or the careers of those who have played in Zorro TV shows or movies; and

-An OPPORTUNITY to share the history of the Zorro legend, and Zorro memorabilia and trivia with other interested parties.

Z: THE ZORRO LETTERZINE/NEWSLETTER #4 contains full size pages, with side staples and a regular zine cover with artwork. It has letters from John Gertz, head of Zorro Productions, Inc. and Philip John Taylor, the Family Channel ZORRO's story editor, plus a detailed episode guide to the fourth season of the Family Channel ZORRO, an article on Henry Darrow, want ads, and lots and lots of letters from Zorro fans.

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE #2/#3 contains 52 full size pages with the same format as #4. It has letters, a complete episode guide with plot synopses and telecast dates for the Disney ZORRO episodes, an article on Johnston McCulley, short fiction, a retrospective of the film career of Duncan Regehr, and want ads.

Subscriptions are $12.00 for four issues. Issue #4 ordered alone is $3.50, or Special Double Issue #2/3 ordered alone is $6.00. (Please specify what issue you would like your subscription to begin with.)

I am greatly anticipating hearing from Zorro fans everywhere, and invite all correspondecne and inquiries.

Contact/Order From: Mary Ann B. McKinnon
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

Also coming in 1993:

Z: THE ZORRO ZINE
Zorro fiction, poetry, and art
Approximately 150 pages
SASE for notification of availability

Introducing a new "Robin of Sherwood" zine entitled

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL

FULL MOON. a novella by Janet P. Reedman. Sixteen years have passed since the death of Robin of Loxley upon the tor. But now Herne grows old, and a new Hunter is needed... Adventure and romance, loves lost and loves found for both Robin and Robert in the world of "Robin of Sherwood."

MIRROR OF FIRE. by Valerie Meachum. Liara the Irish witch has seen a vision of death upon the tor. Can she find the mysterious Hooded Man in time to prevent his fate?

GOOD FORTUNE, GOOD MEASURE. by Todd Parrish. The crumbling clay image of Robin Hood has left Guy of Gisburne in sad straits. What can he do but run away and hope he is not caught by the king's men? But then things get worse! A humorous tale of misadventure, mismatch, and woe, as a lumbering wagon leaves Guy prisoner of a broken leg in the home of a *very* reluctant Sarah de Talmont...

ON THE COLD HILL'S SIDE. a novella by Rebecca Brothers, Pat Dunn, and Diana Smith. The blood-drinking **fugnwr gwaed** has attacked Lady Marion. All seems lost until a mysterious stranger and his Lady show up to help, and Robin of Loxley listens carefully to Herne about how to use the silver arrow.

Plus stories by Gail Molnar, Agnes Vanderschoot, and Michelle Christian & B.N. Fish, and poetry by Janet P. Reedman, Gail Molnar, Linda Frankel, Denyse Bridger, Karen Campbell, and Lisa Savignano.

And there is also something completely different! WHAT IF Marguerite of Gisburne's husband had truly died in the Crusades, and Guy were the legitimate older son of Earl David and heir to Huntingdon? How would this affect the lives and personalities of Robert, Guy, Robin of Loxley, and all the other characters in "Robin of Sherwood"?

In a series of linked stories, Todd Parrish, Julie Phipps, Laura Chevening, Joette Rozanski, Anne Motley, and Jacquie Groom are the first to explore this possibility:

IN CHILD'S HANDS. by Todd Parrish. Two young brothers find a wounded bird in the highest tower of Huntingdon.

CHILDREN OF THE FOREST. by Julie Phipps. When Robert de Rainault is caught in the middle of a mud fight between Guy, Robert, and their young playmate Elise, de Rainault's harsh treatment of the peasant girl gives Robert his first taste of injustice in the world.

THE VIGIL. by Laura Chevening. During Guy's vigil for the knighthood, the vision that comes to his thirteen-year-old brother Robert is not quite what the young knight-to-be bargained for.

THE GREENWOOD BECKONS. by Joette Rozanski. Returning home through Sherwood, Sir Guy and his younger brother Robert are "invited" to sup with the outlaws, leaving lasting impressions on both brothers.

FOULING THE WATERS. by Joette Rozanski. Sir Guy conspires with Gulnar to break up the secret friendship between Robert and Loxley that has dominated his brother's life for the past three years.

TO BECOME A MAN. by Anne Motley. When sixteen-year-old Robert visits his Uncle Edgar, he finds out that his favorite uncle is not quite what he thought him to be.

CONVERSATION. by Jacquie Groom. After freeing the outlaws on the day that Robin of Loxley died upon the tor, Robert returns to Huntingdon one last time to say good-bye to his brother.

ACCEPTANCE. by Jacquie Groom. Robin of Loxley lies dead upon the tor. Will the outlaws of Sherwood accept a new Son of Herne to be their leader?

Plus art by Frances Quinn, Kitty Gamarra, Kathy Spivey, Tara O'Shea, Michelle West, Barb Johnson, Roseanne Rice, Todd Parrish, Gail Molnar, and more. COLOR front cover of Loxley by Barb Johnson, half-tone back cover of Robert and Marion by Tara O'Shea. All art work screened. 185+ pages, spiral bound. Edited by Mary Ann B. McKinnon.

$17.00 postpaid First Class in the U.S. $20.00 Airmail to Canada. $25.00 to Europe, and $34.00 to the Pacific. All orders should be in U.S. funds, except that Canadian orders in the amount of $22.00 will be accepted in Canadian funds. International Money Orders only please for orders outside the U.S. and Canada.

Order from: Mary Ann B. McKinnon
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, MI 48170

Also coming or available (SASE for further information): GOOD GUYS WEAR FANGS. THE GOOD GUY VAMPIRE LETTERZINE. Z: THE ZORRO ZINE. Z: THE ZORRO LETTERZINE. HEAVENLY CONNECTIONS.

(Now accepting submissions for ***TURN OF THE WHEEL*** *2. Please SASE for further information.)*

Now accepting "Robin of Sherwood" stories, art and poetry for the second issue of:

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL

The following stories, poetry, and art are welcome as submissions for THE TURN OF THE WHEEL 2:

1. Any "Robin of Sherwood" theme
2. Any "Robin of Sherwood" WHAT IF theme
3. Material in the shared "Guy of Huntingdon" scenario, which looks at how the lives and personalities of all the characters in "Robin of Sherwood" would be different if Guy had been the legitimate older son and heir to Huntingdon.*
4. Independent "Guy of Huntingdon" material, not part of the shared scenario.
5. Stories based upon the OTHER roles of Michael Praed, Jason Connery, and the cast of "Robin of Sherwood"; crossovers with the series are particularly welcome. DO please make sure that the reader would not need ANY familiarity with the other role in order to enjoy the story.
6. Articles exploring the historical background of the series.

*If you would like to write in the shared "Guy of Huntingdon" scenario, please contact me and let me know what story idea you have in mind; this way I can send you notes as to where the shared scenario currently stands, and make sure that two people don't write the same story or contradict one another in a major way!

Contact: Mary Ann B. McKinnon
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

The Turn Of The Wheel

Stories, poetry, and art are sought for any "Robin of Sherwood" theme, or write in the scenario given below.

WHAT IF EARL DAVID HAD BEEN TRULY MARRIED TO MARGUERITE OF GISBURNE, MAKING GUY THE HEIR TO HUNTINGDON AND ROBERT A YOUNGER SON? HOW WOULD THIS HAVE AFFECTED THE LIVES AND PERSONALITIES OF GUY, ROBERT, ROBIN OF LOXLEY, AND ALL THE OTHER CHARACTERS IN "ROBIN OF SHERWOOD"?

WHAT IF? This is a recurring favorite among ROS writers, and I have a favorite scenario I would like to share with potential writers, and invite them to come play in my sandbox. The scenario is complex, and has many possible permutations, but does give those fans of Guy of Gisburne a chance to deal with him as a somewhat more likable character than he is in the series. I would caution, however, that in this alternate universe, Robert--and Robin of Loxley--are just as important. The scenario gives several opportunities to deal with Robert's and Guy's character development in ways that would otherwise not be possible. And it allows for the pursuit of a lifelong friendship between Robert and Robin of Loxley. ***Please note that writers are free to pursue the basic premise in any direction their imagination leads, or to play in the shared scenario detailed below; players in the shared scenario do please let me know what they are planning, just so that two people don't write the same story, or contradict one another in a major way!***

THE SHARED SCENARIO PROCEEDS AS FOLLOWS:

Earl David married his true love Lady Marguerite, and she bore him a son named Guy; her husband had truly died in the Crusades. But she died when Guy was born, and Earl David married the woman who was to become Robert's mother.

Now Guy is the heir to the Earldom, and Robert is the younger son. **How different would Guy be from the Sheriff's steward that we see in the series?**

He would have many of the same weaknesses, perhaps even a streak of cruelty, but his inner being would be different; he would at least STRIVE to be basically a good person as he defined it, even if he did get his ego caught up from time to time in the fact that he was the heir to an Earldom.

He would consider Robert idealistic and foolish; the fact that Robert's heart went out to anyone suffering an injustice would seem to him both weak and irresponsible.

Perhaps he would not have had so much blood on his hands, and be so hardened to bloodshed. After his knight's training, he would be given the responsibilities of the Earl's heir, and would have no need to become a professional soldier. Being both legitimate and firstborn son, he would perhaps not suffer from the same insecurities as if he had been the bastard of Gisburne's wife. He certainly would know love and family loyalty, both from his father the Earl, and his idealistic younger brother. And he would have a sense of chivalry and respect for women that the Guy of Gisburne that we love/hate certainly in no way possesses.

Robert, too, would be different than if he had been heir to the Earldom.

He would not have the self-confidence OR the rebelliousness against a weighty set of responsibilities and protocol he had no interest in because there would be little to rebel against; a younger son had neither the importance nor the responsibilities of an heir. Rather, he would be more of a child, and an extra one at that. (Or, on the contrary, would he be forced to grow up too soon? As the Earl's second son, he would not be pampered and humored even when he did not wish to go along with his father's wishes.) Discussions would arise as to what he intended to do with his life, and the always-serious Earl would ask for decisions and commitments he was not ready to give. Would he become vassal to the Earl (whether his father or his brother), or would he enter the Church? Would he enter service elsewhere as a steward to another lord to avoid the inevitable conflicts that would arise when his brother became Earl? It would be a constant struggle, and a constant worry to his father AND brother to try to decide what to do about him.

To summarize, the personalities of the two boys develop as they grow. Robert is primarily different from the series in that he is no longer the oldest son and heir with all the responsibilities that entails, and no longer has so much to lose in becoming the Hooded Man. His compassion for the people is strong. Guy is different in that he is less bloodthirsty, has a stronger personality, sees his unfeeling quirks as a weakness, is very proud of his position as the heir to an Earldom, takes his responsibilities very seriously, tries to be a good person as he defines it, and his first reaction to women is to be respectful to them. However, he thinks of his brother's sensitivity to the suffering of the serfs as a weakness, and still has quirks of cruelty, although he sees it as a weakness in himself rather than feeling amoral about it.

What role does Robin of Loxley play in this scenario?

From the time that he first brings Guy and Robert to sup with him and the Outlaws in Sherwood, Robert and Robin are fast friends, and there are many opportunities to watch this friendship develop. As seen in the stories appearing in the first issue of **THE TURN OF THE WHEEL**, Guy tries very hard to sabotage this friendship; the tale of how Robert and Robin get back together after Guy's treachery has not yet been written.

Straight Loxley stories are also welcome in the "Guy of Huntingdon" scenario; his and the outlaws' adventures take place in this world just as they do in the main story sequence as aired.

And in the days of Robert's children and grandchildren, when there is a new Hooded Man in the forest, Loxley will return from sleep as Herne to rule over Sherwood. (We won't be writing this far ahead for a while!)

What has already been written? The following stories appear in **THE TURN OF THE WHEEL #1:**

IN CHILD'S HANDS, by Todd Parrish. Two young brothers find a wounded bird in the highest tower of Huntingdon.

CHILDREN OF THE FOREST, by Julie Phipps. When Robert de Rainault is caught in the middle of a mud fight between Guy, Robert, and their young playmate Elise, de Rainault's harsh treatment of the peasant girl gives Robert his first taste of injustice in the world.

THE VIGIL, by Laura Chevening. During Guy's vigil for the knighthood, the vision that comes to his thirteen-year-old brother Robert is not quite what the young knight-to-be bargained for.

THE GREENWOOD BECKONS, by Joette Rozanski. Returning home through Sherwood, Sir Guy and his younger brother Robert are "invited" to sup with the outlaws, leaving lasting impressions on both brothers.

FOULING THE WATERS, by Joette Rozanski. Sir Guy conspires with Gulnar to break up the secret friendship between Robert and Loxley that has dominated his brother's life for the past three years.

TO BECOME A MAN, by Anne Motley. When sixteen-year-old Robert visits his Uncle Edgar, he finds out that his favorite uncle is not quite what he thought him to be.

CONVERSATION, by Jacquie Groom. After freeing the outlaws on the day that Robin of Loxley died upon the tor, Robert returns to Huntingdon one last time to say good-bye to his brother.

ACCEPTANCE, by Jacquie Groom. Robin of Loxley lies dead upon the tor. Will the outlaws of Sherwood accept a new Son of Herne to be their leader?

So where do we go from here? Stories that are currently being written for upcoming issues include the following:

When Loxley and Much are first caught for poaching by the Sheriff's steward Ralph, their first abortive escape attempt results in a flogging for Loxley. This incident also figures as a plot element in later stories.

When Robert makes his first sojourn back to visit the outlaws after his and Guy's first meeting with them in the Forest, Scarlet makes a very definite attempt to make Robert want this to be his LAST visit. This one definitely promises to have a touch of humor!

A few weeks later, things take a grim turn. Although he doesn't actually raise the weapon that commits the murder, Guy is most definitely responsible for the death of Much's father. This--and

(Over, please)

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL

(Continued)

the fact that it is Guy rather than the Sheriff's steward Ralph who is on the outlaws' dunking rod in "The Witch of Elsdon" -- causes the enmity between Guy and Loxley to escalate, even though in this case Guy is of course not the Sheriff's steward, and is in no way obligated to help him hunt for outlaws. (It should be noted that there is definitely a different relationship between the Sheriff and Guy of Huntingdon, heir to an Earldom, than there is between the Sheriff and his steward, Guy of Gisburne, in the aired series!)

Sixteen, almost seventeen, Robert helps Wulfrida, a serving girl he met at his Uncle Edgar's castle, escape his uncle's clutches.

In a combination of elements from "Herne's Son" and "The Power of Albion," Robert seeks to free a kidnapped Marion from the clutches of Guy and Owen of Clun, discovering at Clun castle that Albion "cannot slay its master."

At Robert's first Beltaine as the Hooded Man, Herne has commanded that he must choose a Maiden, or risk losing the trust of the people. Torn between the loss of her husband, and the desire not to see Robert be with another, Marion agrees to be with him. When she can't go through with it, Loxley shows up to lend a hand. A tasteful, romantic tale reminiscent of "Ghost"!

Robert has been in the Forest for seven years, as had Loxley before him, and the Wheel has turned. Now, he has been captured by the Sheriff, and stands on the scaffold. Alan a Dale and his Lady, regular spies for the Outlaws, have informed them that the latest emissary from the king is actually a practitioner of black magic, and Robert is to be a sacrifice... In a desperate attempt to stall for time, Nasir attempts to graze his arm with an arrow to spoil the "perfect sacrifice." But two boys playing tag jostle him just as he is aiming, and the arrow enters Robert's chest... A tale of life lost and life regained, meeting with old friends, guilt, and return...

Guilty over shooting Robert, Nasir has disappeared. When Robert has sufficiently recovered, and no one can tell him where Nasir is, he sets off to find him. Their odyssey together is planned to take months of story time, and be of novella length, and take them on an adventure to far off lands--perhaps even to Nasir's homeland--and leave them closer than brothers.

The Wheel turns. It is 1214. Robert is caught by the Sheriff and undergoes an incredible ordeal before he finally follows Herne's bidding and returns to Huntingdon.

It is the 1220's. Robert has returned to Huntingdon, and is Earl. The outlaws have been pardoned. Guy, after being "killed" by Robert many years before, lost his memory and disappeared on a strange odyssey of the soul; everyone believes him to be dead except Robert, who has been told by Herne that he must proceed as if it were so. Now Robert's illegitimate son and daughter by Wulfrida have returned from Scotland. This is the story of his son, Henry Nicholas, who is in turn his father's steward, Sheriff of Nottingham, an outlaw in the band of the new Hooded Man, and Crusader! (The author assures me that there will be lots of humor, and scenes to savor!) It is also the story which introduces the dynamics of the band of the new Hooded Man--Robert's brother John--and all of his followers. (Visualize Geraint Wyn-Davies, currently starring in "Forever Knight," as Henry Nicholas, and Andy Garcia as John.)

Loxley has returned from sleep as the Lord of the Trees to combat a great evil growing in Sherwood--Robert's youngest brother William, now Earl, is obsessed with capturing and killing the Hooded Man, and mounting a Crusade inspired by the massacre of the Albigensians in France, to end forever the "heathen" following of that "horned devil" Herne. Tension gradually builds over a forty year period until Loxley's son, Robin of Darkmere, the last Hooded Man of this cycle, takes on the maniacal Earl and his army of followers to save the lives of all those who follow the forest god Herne. (This one will not appear for a while!)

So what needs to be written?

Just about anything you can think of! There is a huge bundle of notes of where this thing appears to be going at the moment, and it is available to anyone who would like to consider writing in the shared scenario. Contributions of $3.00 to help with duplicating and postage would be appreciated -- the packet is huge! -- but are not mandatory.) Story lines to be pursued down the line include Earl David's marriage to his third wife Isabella, a warm and feisty lady who shares the outlaws concern for the poor, and the lives of their three children--and Isabella's respect and admiration for Nasir, culminating in their marriage a year after Earl David's death. (Picture an artistocratic version of Patrice Martinez of "Zorro" as Isabella.) It is Saleme, the daughter of Isabella and Nasir, who joins with Loxley after he becomes Herne to conceive the child who will become Robin of Darkmere, fey son of the body of the Lord of the Trees, always with one foot in this world and one in the next; he has many of the powers of "forest magic" that some of us wished we had seen Loxley exhibiting in the series...! (Saleme looks like Joanna Going, who played Victoria Winters in the new "Dark Shadows," and Robin of Darkmere looks like his father.)

But we mustn't forget the early years. To round out the stories for #2, it would be nice to have a tale or two of Robert and Guy's childhood and youth and their early relationship; of Robert's friendship with the outlaws (perhaps he is with them target shooting when they unexpectedly are set upon by "Seven Poor Knights From Acre," or is swept up in some similar fashion!); of the events during Robert's first year as Robin Hood which lead Guy to hate him even more than he did Loxley (what on earth could have happened?!); Guy's adventures during the long years he is missing; and any other tales which those stories which you see in the current volume might inspire.

If you'd like to jump in and play, do please write to me! As noted above, there are lots of detailed notes, always in flux, about where this whole thing is going, and lots of folks to brainstorm and share ideas with. It's amazing how many stories bounce off of other stories. I look forward to hearing from everyone!

Blessed Bel.

MaryAnn

Mary Ann McKinnon, Editor
THE TURN OF THE WHEEL
254 Blunk Avenue
Plymouth, Mi. 48170

P.S. Independent "Guy of Huntingdon" stories which are not part of the shared scenario are also welcome, as are stories concerning any other "Robin of Sherwood theme," including WHAT IF tales. (Another shared WHAT IF scenario being introduced for THE TURN OF THE WHEEL 2 is "Robert of Huntingdon a.k.a. Robin Hood," which asks: WHAT IF the torturer in "The Power of Albion" had died for real and Robert's identity had not been given away? In this case, Guy -- and Guy alone! -- knows the truth, and cannot prove it or get anyone to believe him. So half the fun is Guy's attempts to prove Robert's secret identity, and his constant frustration, just as with Superman and Lois Lane. The other half is in watching Robert play the spoiled and pampered Earl's son (we saw a glimpse of this in "Power of Albion") when he mingles in polite society to spy for the outlaws! If this interests you, write to me with your story ideas. There is a one page sheet of ideas, but this one is just beginning.

The Turn of the Wheel #1 is available for $17.00 in the U.S. First Class Airmail, or SASE for a flyer describing the contents in adddition to the "Guy of Huntingdon" stories. The zine is 185+ pages, and has a color cover by Barb Johnson and screened art. (The "Guy of Huntingdon" stories make up about a third of the zine.) Foreign rates: $20 in Canada, $25 to Europe, $34 to the Pacific. All orders should be in U.S. funds, except that Canadian orders in the amount of $22 will be accepted in Canadian funds. International Money orders only please for orders outside the U.S. and Canada.

Be sure to note that this one has two NICK KNIGHT stories, plus SON of DARKNESS and MIAMI VICE as well as ROBIN OF SHERWOOD!

THE SHERWOOD TUNNELS

#7 — Colour Cover by Arlene Gogan Olivier
(vampire theme: Max Schreck/Nick Knight)

Fiction: **DECEMPTIONS** (ROS) Linda A. Furey
THE OTHER GIFT OF THE MAGI (DW/POTO)
Nancy Hutchins
HUNTER (The Ranker) Denyse Bridger
KEEPING THE RHYTHM (SI-NG) Jackie Marshall
ONLY HUMAN (Nick Knight) F. Elizabeth Gregory
WINTER'S TALE (ROS) Julianne Tooney
THOUSANDS OF VOICES (Quantum Leap) Leslie Goldberg
ROGUE (Sapphire & Steel) David Tulley
ROBIN HOOD (ROS) Iva Stranglove
SKYFATHER (ROS) Janet P. Reedman
MOON IS MY MISTRESS (B&IB) Marcia Lefebvre
A CERTAIN TIME & PLACE (ROS/SI-NG) Jacquie Groom
CHILD'S PLACE (Miami Vice) S. Lee Story, **MANY VOICES** (ROS) Debra Patus
NIGHT OF RECKONING (Nick Knight & Max Schreck) Dianne m. Smith & Janet P. Reedman
ROBIN HOOD & THE HUNTER (ROS/Star Wars) Sue Bursztynski
INTROSPECT/PARODOX (Wizards & Warriors) Denyse Bridger
L'IL EITHELBURG (ROS) Iva Strangelove, **WHOM THE GODS LOVE** (SI-NG) Linda Knights
INTERLUDE (ROS) Lucy Doyle, **DRY ICE** (Nick Knight) Cheryl L. Conors
HEART UNMASKED (Zorro) Denyse Bridger, **CLOSEST LEAP** (OL/Alien Nation) Leslie Goldberg
SERPENT'S STING (Black Adder/ROS) Louise Bath, **TASTE FOR ADVENTURE** (Pulaski) Jackie Marshall
POINT OF NO RETURN (Nick Knight, Lost Boys, B&IB) Dianne m. Smith

Plus art by: Frances Quinn, Mary Prince, Kitty, Arlene Gogan Olivier, Mary Prince, Linda Knights, C.H. Burnett & Denyse Bridger

387 pages, spiral bound, $27.00 us

#8— upcoming late 1992 or early 93.
what I have so far: SPIRIT-WOLF (B&IB) Gianina D'Andrea, INFERNAL DEVICES (Space 1999) David Tulley
TOPLESS TOWERS OF CAMELOT (ROS/Star Trek) Sue Bursztynski, BENEATH THE HOOD (ROS) Kitty Camarra,
DANCES WITH WOLFHEADS (Robin Hood) A SOLDIER'S TALE (ROS) Louise Bath,
UTA MEANS SWORD (fantasy) Patience Sibeal, CLOSE TO THE EDGE (Pulaksi) Jackie Marshall
BLOOD RUNS DRY (orignal vampire) Dianne m. Smith — art by Frances Quinn & Todd Parish.

Need more to fill a zine. Send all enquires and matieral to the Editoral address.
Dianne m. Smith, 201 Sims Ave, Victoria, B.C. V8Z 1K4, Canada

All zine orders payable to: Bill Hupe, 916 Lamb Road, Mason, MI, 48854-9445, USA

Back orders of WHO'S BLAKE 1,2,3 & 4 and SHERWOOD TUNNELS ,5 & 6 are now available through Bill Hupe. Send SASE for prices. W/B 1 (DW & Blake 7 only) 2, 3 & 4 also includes ROS and B&IB
Sherwood Tunnels are multi media zines.

The Vampire's Crypt

Margaret Carter
105 Phipps Lane
Annapolis, MD 21403

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No. 2 -- Interviews with Suzy McKee Charnas and Elaine Bergstrom, plus stories, poems, reviews, and a list of anthology reprint sources for over a hundred vampire tales. $7.00 postpaid. ($6.00)
No. 3 -- Interview with L. A. Freed, author of Blood Thirst. $7.00 postpaid. ($6.00)
No. 4 -- Interview with Chelsea Quinn Yarbro. $7.50 postpaid. ($6.00)
No. 5 -- Interview with Tanya Huff, author of Blood Price. $7.50. ($6.00)
No. 6 -- September 1992. Poppy Z. Brite (Lost Souls) interview $7.50. ($6.00)
No. 7 -- March 1993. Interviews with Lois Tilton and P. N. Elrod. $7.50. ($6.00)

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM MARGARET L. CARTER

Annual updates for the fiction section of The Vampire in Literature: A Critical Bibliography (UMI Research Press, 1989). January 1990 and January 1991 updates -- each $5.00 postpaid. 1992 and 1993 updates -- $3.00 each.

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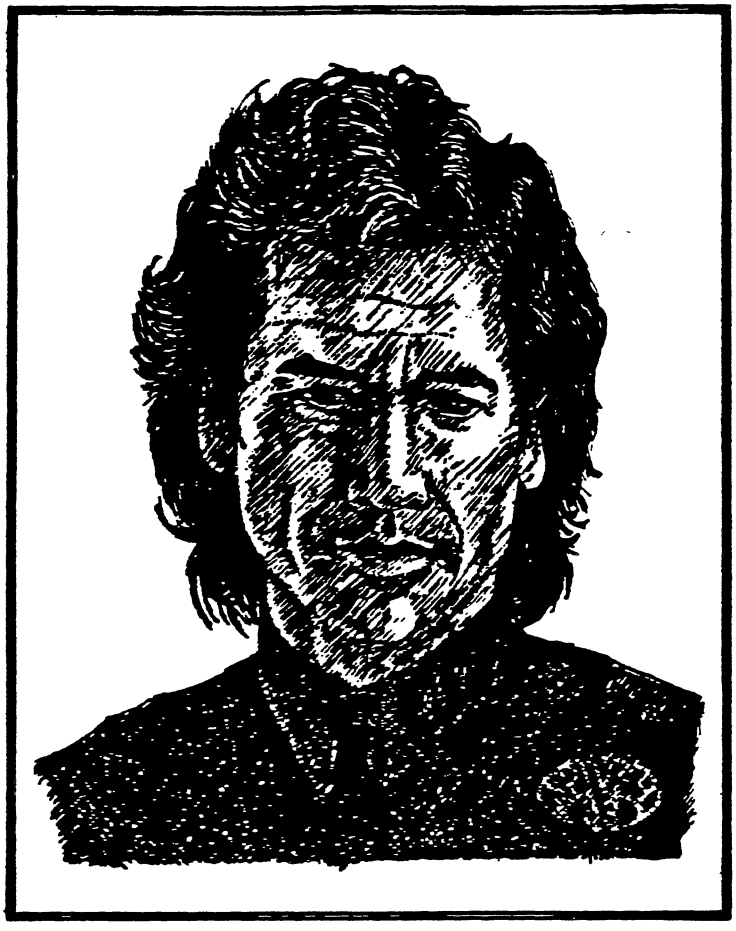

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Judith R. Conly
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Brooklyn, NY 11204

Remember, the success of this fan club depends on you!

THE DARK SHADOWS STORYLINE

The DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCEs are accurate, fully-detailed summaries of episodes of DARK SHADOWS. Each volume describes every episode within a particular time period. Additionally, each book contains many never-published photos, including ones provided by Kathryn Leigh Scott, Sy Tomashoff (DARK SHADOWS Set Designer), and candid costume pictures by Edith Tilles (DARK SHADOWS Hair Stylist). Also included are complete cast/technical crew lists, trivia, and special publicity materials. Each volume is fully illustrated by Arthur Warren Oddson.

THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE 1795 - $16.00. Full-color cover.

Episodes 365-461. Details how the witch Angelique, violently jealous over Barnabas' love for Josette DuPres, first tries to destroy that love by causing Josette and Jeremiah Collins to fall in love. When this fails to change Barnabas' feelings for Josette, Angelique places the vampire curse on him, leading to the tragedy of Josette's suicide. Victoria Winters, traveller from the future, is blamed for these events and charged with witchcraft by the zealous Rev. Trask.

THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE 1968 VOLUME I - $16.00. Full-color cover.

Episodes 461-571. Details the Dream Curse, the creation of the artificial man Adam, the arrival of warlock Nicholas Blair, the destruction of Cassandra, the resurrection of Angelique as a vampire, and Julia Hoffman's victimization by vampire Tom Jennings.

THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE 1968 VOLUME II - $16.00. Full-color cover.

Episodes 572-700. Details the creation and desctruction of Eve, Nicholas Blair's fate, the Chris Jennings' werewolf story, and the haunting of Collinwood by the ghosts of Quentin Collins and Beth Chavez.

THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE 1897 and THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE LEVIATHAN are planned for future publication. Please send a separate SASE (Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope) to the address below for information on each book. Each SASE will be returned when each volume is produced and priced, as they will be published at different times.

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THE DARK SHADOWS CONCORDANCE 1840 - $17.00. Full-color cover.

Episodes 1061-1245 (DARK SHADOWS' last episode). The plot: After the conclusion of Parallel Time, Barnabas and Julia find themselves 25 years in the future in a Collinwood abandoned, ruined, and haunted by ghosts. The only people who could explain the tragedy - Carolyn and Quentin - are hopelessly insane. Thus begins a chase through time to prevent the destruction of Collinwood and the Collins Family. Barnabas and Julia return to 1970 with the cryptic clues Carolyn gave them. They are powerless to change what has happened, and are forced to journey even further back - to the year 1840. There, the ultimate secret of the curse following the Collins Family - and Angelique's true identity - are revealed. This volume concludes with Parallel Time 1841, where the Collins Family is forced to undergo a hideous lottery every generation, a lottery which always leads to madness - or death.

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RESOLUTIONS IN TIME - a novel by Dale Clark. Collinwood, 1971: After Barnabas and Julia returned from 1840, all was calm. Then a mysterious stranger came to town, and their peace was shattered in a reign of terror such as Collinwood has never known. When they learned the stranger's identity, they realized his intent was not only to destroy the Collins family in the present, but in every generation that has ever existed. Thus begins a desperate race back through time to end the curse which has plagued the Collins family for centuries. Illustrated by Judi Boguslawski. Originally published 1980. Cost: $9.00

BEGINNINGS: THE ISLAND OF GHOSTS, a novel by Kathleen Resch and Marcy Robin. "Against a historical background of civil war and slave rebellion, of secrets, voodoo and sudden death. Josett DuPres and Angelique Bouchard grow to womanhood...eah seeking the love they know that someday they will find. Illustrated by Judi Boguslawski, Jo Ann Christy, Guy Haines, Cindy Jorgensen, and Janet Meehan. Originally published 1982. Cost: $18.00

DECADES: 1760 - 1800. This anthology focused on the lives, loves and tragedies of the Collins and DuPres families during the years 1760 to 1800. Events depicted on the series are explored and expanded upon; backgrounds given to familiar characters; 'what if' possibilities are explored. Contains stories by Virginia Waldron, Marcy Robin, Kathleen Resch, Jean Graham, Geoffrey Hamell, Dale Clark,. Art by Dave Billman, Shari Metcalf, Janet Meehan, Judi Boguslawski, Cindy Jorgensen, Jane Lach, Jo Ann Christy. Originally published 1982. Cost: $19.00

ECHOES - Stories by Lori Paige, Jean Graham, Carol Maschke, Meghan Powell-Nivling, Melody Clark and Virginia Waldron. Art by Jane Lach, Dave Billman and Anne Marie Erental, with color cover by Cindy Jorgensen. Originally published 1983. Cost: $12.00.

REBIRTH OF THE UNDEAD - a novel by Elwood Beaty and D. L. Crabtree. An ancient evil is brought upon the world, and Barnabas Collins finds a most unexpected ally - Count Dracula - in his fight to save Collinwood. Illustrated by Guy Haines. Originally published 1984. Cost: $12.00

DARK CHANGELING - a novel by Lori Paige, illustrated by Anne- Marie Erental. Lethe had finally found a family. But on her trip to Collinsport to meet her newfound relatives, her body is possessed by a jealous ravening power; one striking out blindly against the injustices in her own life, consumed with hate. And on her arrival, the thing inside her body set every inhabitant of the Collins estate against each other... Originally published 1984. Cost: $6.00

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Order from: Kathleen Resch, PO Box 1766, Temple City, CA 91780

The Latest News From, About, and For DARK SHADOWS Cast, Crew, and Fans
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- Full reports/publicity from Science Fiction Channel on its national broadcast of original series episodes
- Confirmed, direct national tour performance schedule, interviews, and publicity materials for Jonathan Frid's one-man Readers Theatre shows
- Announcing and detailing the annual DARK SHADOWS FESTIVAL conventions from coast-to-coast: featuring cast/crew guests, Q&A and Autograph sessions, rare videos, memorabilia, and more
- Major DARK SHADOWS professional and quality fan publications and projects
- The DARK SHADOWS fans themselves

Our information is received directly from the DARK SHADOWS cast and crew so they can inform and update you, plus from Innovation Publishing, Abbelare Co., Action Kits International, MPI, Science Fiction Channel, and those responsible for the many exciting developments and projects for DARK SHADOWS today. We utilize entertainment industry contacts, TV stations, the professional media, and interested, enthusiastic fans from around the world.

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Barb '93
Nicholas and Varina